

# One in a Million

*Notes on creating super-campaigns*

by Roger E. Moore

Much has been written about how a game referee can put together a detailed and seemingly realistic campaign world for fantasy role-playing games, but little has been said about setting up campaign worlds for games using costumed heroes. Why bother? Two of the major heroic role-playing games on the market (the MARVEL SUPER HEROES™ and DC HEROES games) come with their own evolving universes, based on comics from the two respective companies.

But what if you are using one of the other heroic game systems, such as the CHAMPIONS™, VILLAINS & VIGILANTES™, or SUPERWORLD games? A number of referees simply copy the Marvel or DC worlds (or both) and install them, complete with their respective heroes and villains, into their campaigns. This is rather like making every fantasy campaign an exact copy of Middle Earth — which is frequently done, but doesn't say much for one's originality.

The campaign universe you create for your own heroes and villains can be just as good as any other. The comic books point out that there are millions of alternate and parallel universes; your campaign is simply one of them. Below are some considerations that can enliven and deepen your heroic campaign, giving it realism that can make it last.

One caveat: This article assumes that the campaign you are running is similar to (but not the same as) the current comic-book universes. Unusual campaigns based upon alien, magical, or lost-atomic worlds will have to be dealt with in another article, though some of the guidelines given here would also apply to them. Campaigns not based in or around North America will also be dealt with elsewhere.

## Populations

How many non-player heroes and villains are there in your campaign? For the sake of argument, it helps to assume

a general ratio of one super-powered character coming to life for every one million citizens in a particular country or region. This proves to be a very convenient figure; by this reckoning, the United States of America should have 232 super-powered heroes and villains of every sort. This compares nicely with the numbers of heroes and villains from the major comics worlds.

The 1:1,000,000 ratio is fine, but it implies all sorts of surprising things. Canada should have 24 super characters, Australia 15, New Zealand 3, and the United Kingdom 56 (5 of them Scotsmen). Also, by this reasoning, the Soviet Union should have about 270 super-powered characters, and mainland China has 1,008! Okay, you *could* have a campaign in which China's super-force dominates the world, but for now, we'll focus on North American campaigns.

Super-characters can usually be classified into the following individual categories: trained athlete, inventive genius, altered human, natural mutant, mythic being, technology-augmented hero, artificial being (like robots and androids), sorcerer, alien, and assorted non-humans. It stands to reason that more advanced nations have a better chance of having heroes and villains who use powered armor and other high-tech devices. Heroic training programs would be better funded, and better communications and transportation would benefit the development of super-groups. Money is power, and money means more super-types.

Mythic, legendary, sorcerous, and alien characters could still appear from underdeveloped countries, joined by a few highly trained geniuses, detectives, athletes, and a rare hightech hero or villain, perhaps produced as part of a secret government project. Underdeveloped nations often have poor medical care, which would affect the survival rate of both heroes and villains. One would thus expect that few super-characters would come from these places, perhaps only one per five or ten million people.



An almanac gives a clearer picture of which countries would be considered underdeveloped. With references to a North American campaign, Haiti usually appears to be the worst off, and countries like Trinidad and Costa Rica seem to be doing rather well, though they are not in the same economic league as Canada and the United States. Mexico, with its high population, should have many super types, whether one considers it underdeveloped or not.

In any nation, political considerations could also affect the appearance of super-characters. An anti-government hero might be quickly captured and killed by the armed forces; an anti-mutant government might kill off all persons with strange powers. Development of these aspects of the world are left to the referee to resolve.

Using an almanac listing various countries and their populations, the following table was developed for determining the numbers of super-beings in the vicinity of North America. Each country is listed with the number of millions of people who live there, equal to the number of super-powered characters who would also live there (based on the 1:1,000,000 ratio). As noted above, underdeveloped countries might have fewer heroes and villains than these numbers indicate.

Canada	24.4
Costa Rica	2.3
Cuba	9.8
Dominican Republic	5.7
El Salvador	5.0
Guatemala	7.7
Haiti	6.1
Honduras	4.0
Jamaica	2.2
Mexico	71.3
Nicaragua	2.6
Panama	1.9
Trinidad and Tobago	1.1
United States	232.0*

\* — Includes Puerto Rico, which would have 3.1 super-characters originating from it.

There are some eye-openers in the above chart. Most people will automatically think of America and Canada as super-character homelands, but Mexico virtually begs for heroic representation. A few heroes and villains would be scattered across Central America and the Caribbean, and Cuba is the largest of these minor hero-producers. Do some particular scenarios suggest themselves here?

It was assumed that the following countries and foreign territories had no super-powered beings associated with them, because of their low population figures: Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bermuda, British West Indies, Greenland, Dominica, Grenada, Guadeloupe, Iceland, Martinique, Saint Lucia, St. Pierre and Miquelon, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Of course, if you *want* a hero from one of these places in your campaign, you can have one. It's your campaign, and Grenada would probably appreciate the thought.

It is worthwhile to divide further the largest countries into their various major territorial possessions and states. Most Canadian super-powered characters should hail from Ontario and Quebec; most American characters ought to call California, New York, Texas, Pennsyl-

vania, Illinois, and Ohio their home states. Special heroes and villains could come from areas with low populations, such as the Northwest Territories, Alaska, and Wyoming, but these should be relatively rare.

Particular ethnic groups should be accounted for in any grouping of heroes and villains. An almanac reveals that you could expect to find about 26.5 black and 14.6 Hispanic super-characters in the United States (excluding Puerto Rico). Discrimination could alter these proportions, of course. Male and female characters would be equally represented in all categories, unless you feel that selective discrimination would alter this balance as well. Religious and political factors in sorting super-types would also be interesting to add.

Every group of super-powered heroes needs a major metropolis to defend and to use as their main base. For a North American campaign, all cities with more than 1,000,000 citizens qualify for hero-group status, though they might not have one in any particular campaign. Below are the major cities of North America and the number of millions of people there (as well as the number of super-characters who might come from there).

Canada	
Toronto	3.0
Montreal	2.8
Vancouver	1.2
Cuba	
Havana	1.0
Dominican Republic	
Santo Domingo	1.3
Guatemala	
Guatemala City	1.3
Mexico	
Mexico City	17.0*
Guadalajara	2.4*
Monterrey	2.0*
United States**	
New York City	7.0
Chicago	3.0
Los Angeles	3.0
Philadelphia	1.7
Houston	1.6
Detroit	1.2

\* — Includes metropolitan areas.

\*\* — Excludes metropolitan areas, of which there are 29 in the United States with populations greater than 1 million, including San Juan, Puerto Rico.

### Suggested characters

What can be done with these statistics? Think of the new heroes and villains that your campaign can acquire! Aztec,

Mayan, American Indian, and Eskimo deities, villains, and heroes can make their appearances. Voodoo sorcerers appear from the Caribbean, as well as pirate and conquistador figures from the Caribbean and Mexico. Communist characters from Cuba (as well as anti-communist ones) come into play. The diversity of new characters may enrich any heroic campaign.

Heroes and villains from other universes could, of course, be added to the above. If you think a particular villain who was slain in a recent comic book deserves a second chance to be bad, you can simply declare that he popped into your universe at the time of his death. Perhaps a major hero or villain was cloned or duplicated by alien forces, and the clone now resides in Pittsburg or Houston. Any "doubled" super-characters should be in addition to the ones produced by these statistics.

Note that these characters, as stated before, are also in addition to the ones the players are using. Player character heroes can come from anywhere they wish and shouldn't be bound by the above statistics, which only serve to form a campaign background.

### Scenarios

Though rather dry, these important statistics can lay the groundwork for your super-powered hero campaign and help individualize it. Consider the following scenarios, derived from the above material.

Cuban super-characters attempt to infiltrate U.S. Naval installations in the Caribbean, to sabotage or spy upon them. They may or may not be helped by allied super-characters from the Soviet Union or from other Central American and Caribbean states.

French-speaking heroes are contacted by a secret Canadian government project for work in foiling crime in Quebec.

A Spanish-speaking PC hero is asked to set up a secret super-type identification program in a Central American country. Super-types are taken to a government-funded center, where they are trained and educated to work for the government for the betterment of the country's people. The project, though well-intentioned, is almost certain to cause trouble with heroes and villains in nearby countries, with government officials who wish to pervert the project to serve themselves or the causes of other countries, and with the U.S. State Department and CIA.

Villains from South America, the Car-

ibbean, and Florida have set up a drugs- and arms-smuggling operation that the player characters must shut down as quickly as possible.

A Mexican super-powered hero is touring the city where the player characters reside; their task is to ensure his security during the tour. Unfortunately, extremists have vowed to end his career, and they've picked that city as the place to do it.

After a major victory over the forces of evil, an offer of membership is received from a Chicago super-team for one or more player characters. Perhaps a similar offer is made from a Houston group and another in Los Angeles, and the competition between hero-groups heats up.

ers this, the student may be captured or killed by government troops. Perhaps the CIA might even be involved. .

A teenager arrives from Bermuda, wanting to train with the player characters in crimefighting techniques. She is a scientific genius who has built a high-tech suit for herself. After her training, she wishes to return to her home. If anything bad happens to her during her stay, the British and American governments won't be pleased.

An Aztec demigod who is wreaking havoc in Mexico and the southwestern United States kidnaps one of the PC heroes, holding him or her for millions of dollars in ransom.

The player characters uncover evidence that may lead to the discovery of

contacts with various PC heroes, trying to spy out all they can on the characters' techniques and organization. Once they've learned what they wanted to know, they depart – but they may put their knowledge to uses that the PCs hadn't expected.

A major, world-threatening villain appears and can only be fought by the most powerful heroes of all, to be selected from a number of nations. The heroes, in this case, all come from North America. . .

You get the idea. Create your own bizarre universe of heroes and villains, and don't feel obligated to play the "Middle-Earth" game with your campaign.



a famed black American hero, kidnapped in the mid-Sixties by racists. The problem is that the racists still have the hero (in suspended animation), and they have no intention of giving him up.

The heroes of several small Central American countries are preparing for a major confrontation among themselves, and the PC heroes (on vacation in the area) get dragged into the storm.

A group of heroes or villains from Canada, all in disguise, make covert

A letter is received by a major hero from a school teacher in a repressive Central American country. She is asking for help in enabling one of her students to find asylum in the United States. Her student is a mutant with extraordinary powers; if the local government discov-

# The Crusading Life

by Bruce Humphrey

In many super-powered hero campaigns, the action centers around individual adventures with world-endangering villains. Events between adventures are often of no importance and are sometimes non-existent. Players are faced with no continuity in the campaign, and characters become two-dimensional, coming to life only from crisis to crisis.

But what do heroes do when they aren't saving the world? What about the little people, petty criminals, normal world events, secret identities, and Life In General? A campaign without these factors becomes mechanical; players start the game *knowing* that some global plot is afoot. By throwing in some variety and surprises, the game master can return spontaneity to the campaign. Players will be more challenged and will get more out of the experience.

## Day-to-day encounters

A variety of encounters and adventures gives the players the opportunity to flesh out their characters in day-to-day routines. This can help the players visualize better their characters, give the characters extra experience, give players more control over their characters' lives, and simply serve as a break from saving humanity day in and day out.

Heroes can be just as challenged by normal, non-powered criminals as they are by the big-name super-powered villains. What about hostage situations, attempts to capture a gunman at night, protecting a person from a hit man, or solving the mystery of a clever crime? Many of these situations are a hero's bread and butter, perhaps taking up a majority of his adventures and occasionally bringing in rewards which keep meat on the table. Played well, such adventures can be as fulfilling and exciting as world-saving — and perhaps more

so. Such situations are also useful for those sessions when only two or three gamers get together, since the average world-saving adventure is geared toward four or more characters.

Table A covers those crimes which average, nonpowered criminals are likely to commit (though super-powered ones can and do commit them, too). While most of these crimes may take place "in a vacuum" — having no bearing on the campaign as a whole — they may also be connected to major adventures by providing some clue or contact which will be needed later on. Minor crimes are easy to set up, particularly since the criminals can be generic (bad guys with guns), unless there is some particular reason for giving them more depth. We are all familiar enough with such crimes from watching the news to put together quite a variety of these encounters. Note that as the list of crimes on Table A progresses, the crimes become relatively more dangerous and are likely to involve gunplay or large criminal rackets.

Minor crimes give the heroes the chance to better their powers and test out new ones, experiment with equipment, do good deeds, and establish their personalities and methods of dealing with crime. Exposure to less momentous offenses can not only round out the characters, but can also lend an air of continuity, authenticity, and completeness to the hero campaign. They can boost the morale of the players by showing that the characters are satisfyingly effective against normal criminals; this can be particularly useful after an unsuccessful adventure against super-criminals.

Other events can also challenge the heroes. Helping the community raise funds or saving innocent lives in various accidents or disasters are good ways to put breathing space between major adventures (see Table B). Helping some-

one repair his house, business, or car can provide the group with useful contacts and public relations. Saving people from a burning plane, guiding a disabled ship to safety, or finding a missing bus can be challenging exploits, as is preventing or giving aid after major car collisions. Finding missing persons or retrieving stolen property can also provide a challenge to the heroes and are not particularly dangerous (most of the time). These actions will not only gain friends for the group, but can also bring in reward money, government (national or local) recognition and aid, or lead to contacts which are connected to an upcoming major adventure.

## Nasty surprises

Being a superhero requires some exposure to danger, and any of the events discussed above can lead to lots of it. But, what about seemingly minor events which lead to particularly dangerous exploits and major adventures? These nasty surprises include traps, complex situations, misunderstandings, unexpected hazards, or events resulting from pure stupidity on the characters' parts.

Traps are usually set up by a villain in a major adventure who hopes to get a particular hero out of the way before the hero realizes that he's really in trouble. This seldom works in the comics, and it usually just angers the hero and makes him more determined to win, but the situation shows up with some frequency. Complex situations are those which can easily lead to further, originally unplanned adventures. Such events include things like getting the Mafia mad at you for saving someone from an assassination, trying to break up a mob situation and having the rioters turn on you, or discovering that a purse-snatching leads to a crime ring. These situations involve numerous ordinary criminals and may even be connected to the plots of super-powered villains.

Major misunderstandings often end up with the hero being thrown in jail or running for his life, as he is either purposefully framed or appears to commit a crime without actually doing it. Unexpected hazards include hidden terrorist bombs, driving into a high-speed chase situation, or following a criminal into an abandoned building that's about to be demolished. Pure stupidity covers all those simple situations in which the hero does something so absurd that it quickly devolves into a deadly event. Firing a weapon in the center of a gaso-

line storage building, jumping into the middle of a Mafia chieftains' meeting, or swooping in front of a jet are just a few examples.

### **Complications**

If you want complications to appear in straightforward adventures, you might also consider the non-powered bystanders who frequent heroes' lives. Short adventures may center around the tribulations of various relatives and friends of the heroes. These people seem to get into more trouble than the heroes themselves.

The large number of nuts and kooks running around, particularly in major cities, should also be considered. These people are ordinary citizens who are a little crazy and are caught up in the mystique of super characters. Some hang around heroes and get into trouble, like those people who follow fire-trucks or police cars. Others come to feel that they, too, are great heroes; these are especially dangerous, as they may actually believe that they are helpful and even identify themselves as belonging to the heroes' group. These people can cause major embarrassments when they do something stupid, and they can be downright dangerous if they jump into the middle of a super-powered fight or pretend to have certain powers when they do not.

These same people can become violent enemies of any heroes who treat them badly or try to reason with them. Be forewarned: Disappointed hero-worshippers can make deadly foes if they happen to discover information about a hero and then communicate it to a villain. Role-playing these obnoxious personalities can be a real pleasure for the game master.

### **The government**

Now we come to that fount of aid, the government. At its most agreeable, the local or national government can supply money, facilities, and other support to the heroes. At its worst, it can be intolerant, antagonistic, aggravating, and ignorant. In either case, the presence of the government adds to the game. A pleasant government may grease the tracks for a fledgling super-group, while the difficulties involved in dealing with the government can lead to more realism, interest, and variety in the campaign. The government is the one foe that the heroes cannot overcome — ever.

Government support can be invaluable. Money, in the form of rewards or

actual funding of the group, is always welcome. At least as useful is the research and development (R&D) end, which the government can perform for the heroes in areas such as new powers and equipment, enhancing existing powers, and counteracting villains' powers. The government can provide the best-equipped headquarters to its allied groups, and government aid in locating information, finding people, or defending the group in court can be incalculable.

There is a price for government aid. Never one to leave well enough alone, the bureaucracy in any superworld is going to try to get a popular hero group to do certain things — often things that the heroes would rather not do. From the government's standpoint, this is only fair, since it usually provides well for its favored groups. But, some of the activities which it demands from the group may be distasteful to the heroes. If the heroes complain often enough, the government may stop backing the group. If the group is particularly undiplomatic, the bureaucrats may try to teach the heroes a lesson by becoming extremely difficult and obnoxious.

Government regulations are cumbersome and confusing, but super-powered heroes circumvent them nearly every day. When the government backs the heroes, such indiscretions are usually overlooked (although not forgotten). If the government has it in for them, the heroes could be in serious trouble. Regulations appear as if by magic, bringing fines and legal problems. What happens when bystanders are hurt or property destroyed during the course of an adventure? What if the villain flees and leaves the heroes holding the bag? All is not sweetness and light when the government comes calling under these conditions.

Heroes are used to handling all sorts of problems, but the government is something else again. A government that turns hostile for a time can make a campaign extremely interesting. The time between adventures may be spent in evading federal agents or seeking to regain government favor. This "bad government" situation has to be used sparingly and logically, since overdoing it can kill the campaign quickly.

Even a completely hostile government knows that heroes have their uses. No one is going to treat the heroes and villains equally in any situation; if there is a chance, villains will be captured by government forces even if it means that the heroes escape. Secret admirers of

the pursued heroes may exist on many levels of the government, despite what official notices say. There should always be an out by which the heroes may regain their freedom and pursue their adventures.

### **Personalities**

Characters in super-powered hero campaigns are often so powerful that it is hard to identify with them, and a player who cannot identify with his character will find it nearly impossible to enjoy role-playing in the campaign. Encourage the players to make their characters unique, giving them special personalities and foibles. Every hero is different, but characters are often not as unique as they could be.

Creating the super-persona begins when the character itself is created. Part of the creation process includes designing the hero's costume and noting why it looks the way it does. Does the hero have a secret identity? If so, a face mask is a must (very few can get away without it). Does putting on the costume prepare him mentally for "heroing," or does the character have multiple personalities, one or more of whom enjoy the heroic life? Is the character an egotist who wears his costume for effect (with neon, spangles, epaulettes, and all)? Is his costume intended as camouflage or to protect him from certain super-powers? Does the suit add to or magnify the hero's powers? All of these questions help to make the hero his own person.

When the hero is first created, the player should also note how the hero gained his powers and why he is acting as a hero. Perhaps he accidentally allowed a criminal to hurt his family, or he grew up in a slum and saw so much crime that he wants to do his part to stop it. Some superheroes are preachy, others cynical, some border on being as unscrupulous as the villains. All have their reasons for fighting crime.

Newly started heroes may have their share of mental problems, although these can also crop up later in their careers. Alcoholism is one possible problem; another is a habit of going berserk in combat and becoming not only dangerous to everyone around but also a potential killer. Events during the campaign may also lead to a character becoming so opposed to hurting people that he will use his combat abilities only as a last resort. Some heroes might be prejudiced against particular groups or have strange habits. All of these will help the players to visualize their char-

acters and role-play more effectively.

How the character gets along with other people is a critical aspect of his personality. Perhaps he constantly makes wisecracks even in the worst predicaments, or he never speaks unless the situation absolutely demands it. A character could be a playboy dating normal people or other supercharacters. The character could also be a loner, unwilling to follow some of the group leader's decisions. Another character might value the well-being of a loved one so much that he leaves the group to visit the character periodically. These characters might be difficult to deal with, but they would never be boring.

One thing to avoid in a hero campaign is the bloodthirsty hero. Most heroes do not take lives; to do otherwise would make them villains. Even when such an act is absolutely necessary, few heroes would be unmoved by such a decision. Virtually no hero would stand by and watch even the worst villain die without making some move to aid him. Yet, some players actually initiate super-combats on busy streets, jeopardizing innocent bystanders, or let a villain die of his wounds without lifting a finger. This should not be allowed to occur without a variety of consequences — such as court charges, arrest, hate mail, and attacks on the street by ordinary citizens.

Do super-powered heroes have fears? You wouldn't know it by watching most campaigns. Perhaps the most common hero's fear is having one's secret identity revealed. Another would be a fear of failure — that the hero could one day lose to a villain who causes widespread destruction or harm. A third is the fear of death, although this realization of one's own mortality may fade after many adventures. A hero who gains his powers sometime late in life may be afraid of losing them, and a hero relying on devices afraid of having to do without them. Phobias can also be found in heroes, usually related to their past histories or powers. A fire-oriented hero might be nervous near large amounts of water, or one with ice powers paranoid about high heat. Armored heroes could be afraid of drowning, or flying ones afraid of heights. Some childhood trauma could also lead to phobias which would be severely debilitating (fear of fire, large animals, open spaces, etc.).

As a hero progresses, he should learn the value of public relations. A happy public is a helpful one, and the information, rewards, and accolades make the job worthwhile. Helpful actions, such as

rescuing cats from trees and helping with mundane projects, should be viewed by the players as useful exercises in good business. A good image will help to prevent such things as trials and witch hunts when something untoward happens. A hero with good public relations is more likely to be given the benefit of the doubt in such situations, although the public is fickle and has a short collective memory.

One important decision which a new hero or group must make lies in locating and setting up a headquarters facility. Such a site is going to be both haven and target, and as such requires special treatment. The base must be accessible to people seeking help, yet protected against the enemies the hero or group creates through adventuring. A hidden headquarters is good for safety but bad for public accessibility, while a public office has the opposite problem. The group must decide for itself, balancing availability and security, and considering the group's resources, expectations, equipment, and powers.

If the game master enjoys lots of detail, he may invoke a need for single or group insurance and liability. In a world with super-powered people running around, insurance for heroes would be commonplace. Just what the world needs: an entirely new field of law! Nevertheless, a good lawsuit against a particularly negligent hero group can go a long way toward curbing its destructive tendencies. It is particularly galling if the successful suit is brought by a captured villain, who is not only freed as a result but ends up with the group's money! Insurance premiums would be extremely high for destructive groups, further penalizing players who think super-powers give them the right to do whatever they wish.

Hero organizations can be essential to a long-term campaign, and they may be of any size. Groups can serve many valuable functions. They provide cohesion and a cornerstone for many adventures. They fulfill the heroes' needs for money, since most supergroups have some financing or pooling of individual funds. They allow newer and weaker characters to have support and training, helping out when few other sources would. New players can learn the game while in the company of more experienced players, with everyone acting as a team.

Paying attention to details means a big payoff once play begins. Players with interesting characters and situations are more attentive and enthusiastic. Happy

players mean fewer hassles and more fun; bored players nitpick, argue with the game master and each other, and wander off. Good rules do not necessarily make a good adventure. Good characters can.

**Table A: Everyday crimes**

<i>d20 roll</i>	<i>crime</i>
1	Pickpocketing
2	Purse snatching
3	Animal cruelty
4	Destruction of property
5	Burglary
6	Theft
7	Auto theft
8	Truck highjacking
9	Blackmail
10	Extortion
11	Arson
12	Drug dealing
13	Kidnapping
14	Assault
15	Armed robbery
16	Murder
17	Espionage
18	Sabotage
19	Air or ship piracy
20	Mass murder

**Table B: Special events**

<i>d20 roll</i>	<i>event</i>
1	Find missing person
2	Prevent car or bus wreck
3	Save victims of car wreck
4	Prevent air disaster
5	Save victims of air disaster
6	Save people from storm, tornado, etc.
7	Help repair damaged building
8	Save person from vicious animal
9	Save suicidal person
10	Save people from building fire
11	Break up a mob or riot
12	Save people from gas leak
13	Save people from train wreck
14	Repair structure (bridge, subway, etc.)
15	Save community from gas or radiation leak
16	Save people from building collapse
17	Save people from flood (dam collapses, etc.)
18	Prevent ship from sinking
19	Save stranded people (island, arctic, etc.)
20	Save people from sinking ship or ditched plane

# Easy as 1, 2, 3

## Follow these steps for interesting NPCs

by Rick Swan

When it comes to role-playing non-player characters, most DMs are about as comfortable as an elf at an orc party. And that's hardly surprising. The DM's job is tough enough as it is; since he's already loaded down with all other sorts of responsibilities to keep an adventure on course, he may just decide that creating interesting personalities for his NPCs is one task too many. Besides, with a general idea of the various NPC types, he can always improvise as the need arises.

Unfortunately, this approach can make the game a real drag for the players, especially ones who've gone to the trouble of creating three-dimensional personalities for their player characters. Who can blame them for rolling their eyes as they encounter yet another wise old wizard or swooning damsel in distress? Who wants to interact with cliches?

Like all aspects of being a good DM, breathing life into NPCs requires advance planning. The tried-and-true method of tackling the problem is by creating a sort of "personality profile" for each character, a summary of the NPC's personality that the DM can use as a quick reference when role-playing the character in an adventure. The profile usually consists of a series of descriptive words or phrases that may be written on an index card along with statistics or jotted down in the margin of the module next to the NPC's name.

The *Dungeon Masters Guide* stresses the importance of well-developed NPCs and provides guidelines on pages 100-102 for creating profiles from a series of tables listing possible traits for appearance, disposition, intellect, and other general categories. Traits for each NPC may be specifically chosen from these tables or arrived at randomly by rolling dice.

These guidelines provide a good basis for creating profiles, but there are some problems in leaning on them too heavily. Although the tables are reasonably comprehensive, it's unrealistic to expect them to generate the virtually limitless range of all possible human (and non-human) personality traits. You can come close, but you can't specifically get characters who are "sarcastic," "paranoid," "preoccupied," "alcoholic," or "prone to have psychosomatic pains" by using the tables. Some of

the choices are too similar; there's no great difference between "foppish" and "dandyish" from the Appearance Table, or "lusty" and "lustful" from the Morals Table. Other entries aren't particularly precise. "Insane," for instance, covers a lot of territory; we have no way of knowing from the table if that character is "schizoid," "manic depressive," or just plain "psychotic." Is an NPC "dirty" because he's a hard worker in need of a bath, or is he just a slob? And relying on the tables to generate traits completely at random tends to produce results that are not only unrealistic but unsatisfying, too.

There is, however, an alternate method for creating personality profiles that uses the DMG tables as a starting point. By following a systematic procedure of (1) brainstorming, (2) refining, and (3) testing, you can develop profiles that are easy to use and right on target.

The first step is brainstorming: creating a master list of adjectives and descriptive phrases that will be the basis of your profile. Don't edit yourself when brainstorming. You'll want to list all of the traits that seem obvious as well as any implied ones. Feel free to add any unusual or just plain weird ideas, too. Make your list as long as you like, but ten or twelve possibilities is a good number to shoot for.

To begin your master list, write down any characteristics given in the NPC description or suggested by the statistics, then add any related ideas that occur to you. For instance, if Angela the servant girl is described in a scenario as being 16 years old, weighing 95 pounds, attractive, and having a charisma of 17, you might start your list with "young," "slight," "pretty," and "charming." As you brainstorm for related ideas, you might add "fragile," "gorgeous," and "flirtatious."

Pay attention also to the physical appearance of the NPC and any personality traits it might suggest. If you're unable to visualize the NPC, now might be a good time to refer to the Appearance Table in the DMG and make a selection or a die roll. Don't forget possible traits associated with the character class.

When you've covered the basics, it's time to unleash your imagination and flavor your list with an oddball choice or two. Write down "asthmatic," "sneaky," or "near-sighted" or anything else that appeals to

you on a whim. Check the DMG lists and pick a couple of traits, Chinese-restaurant style (one from column A, one from column B).

If the scenario description of the NPC is sketchy or if you're making your NPC up from scratch, you may have trouble getting off the ground. One good way to get started is to randomly determine one or two fundamental characteristics from the DMG tables and then select complementary, non-conflicting traits. Once the NPC begins to come into focus, you can proceed with brainstorming. Another good method is to pick a friend, celebrity, or fictional character and imagine that person as the NPC. Visualizing your non-descript halfling as Joan Rivers or Miss Piggy ought to inspire some vivid possibilities.

The sources for ideas are endless. In addition to the DMG, you might try looking for descriptive phrases in a thesaurus or dictionary. NPCs from other modules (or even from other games) can be good sources. If you come up with an especially good trait, you might want to add it to the appropriate table in the DMG or start a new list for future reference.

Once you've finished your master list, the next step is refining it. Your finished profile should be as concise as possible; not only does a concise profile make the DM's job easier, it also allows for an ongoing character to develop and change according to circumstances of the campaign. For most NPCs, shoot for a profile of about three adjectives and descriptive phrases. If three elements aren't enough to create a clear mental picture, add a couple more, though it's not necessary to go into a lot of detail. Remember that the profile is a form of shorthand, and one well-chosen descriptive element can suggest many others. ("Feeble," for instance, could remind you that your NPC is also "weak," "old," and "slow-moving.")

Begin refining your master list by taking a look at any elements that pertain to appearance or physical traits and eliminate those that seem unlikely to affect the NPC's personality. Knowing a fighter is "hideous" could conceivably be important in role-playing him; knowing he's "blue-eyed" probably won't be of much help.

Next, combine or eliminate all similar terms, such as "sad" and "unhappy," or "quiet" and "silent." Get rid of all phrases

that strike you as uninteresting or vague. As you go over your list, feel free to add new phrases or substitute better ones. Make the final revisions and refinements by using the following guidelines:

1. Be precise. Like an image in a camera, your profile should be focused for the sharpest and clearest picture. If you want your character to have a pleasant personality, be more specific than "happy." "Cheery" means one thing, while "exhilarated" suggests something entirely different.

2. Choose phrases that are evocative for you, and use your own system of shorthand wherever you want. Don't be inhibited — your players will never know what you've written. Why use "dull" to describe a slow-witted NPC if "airhead" helps you nail him down? Make up your own words if necessary. Don't settle for "cunning" if "J. R. Ewinglike" is more vivid for you. If you've got an NPC with a sense of humor, try phrases like "Lettermanesque" or "Pryorlike" to bring him to life.

3. Use common sense to avoid contradictions or opposites. Unless he's a mental case, an NPC can't be both "perky" and "depressed."

4. Go for extremes. NPCs with extreme traits are not only easier to role-play, they're more fun for the PCs, too. "Miserable" is stronger than "sad," and "suicidal" might be better yet. "Faithful" is vague. "Religious" is better, but why not consider

going all the way and make him a "religious fanatic"?

5. Go for an interesting mix. Chances are, your PCs have had their fill of warriors who are "brave" and "mighty." How about one who's "whining" or "prissy"? (He can still be dangerous.) Or how about a "wise guy"?

When you've finished-refining your profile, you're ready to test it; Using the profile as a guide, imagine how your NPC would respond to a variety of hypothetical questions and statements. Some should be friendly, some hostile, and some just curious. You can select examples from the following list or use the same general ideas to come up with your own.

"Greetings! What's your name, friend?"

"Ready your weapon and prepare to die!"

"That's a nice cloak you have there. Would you consider a trade?"

"Will you join us on our quest for the red dragon?"

"Enemy troops ahead! We've got to do something!"

"Will you allow some weary travelers to rest here for a bit?"

"Do you know where Ramus the Healer resides?" (Assume your NPC doesn't know.)

"Where can we find Princess Marcella?" (Assume your NPC knows that she lives in the next castle.)

"May I borrow your horse?"

"Have you ever heard of Grendar the Mighty?" (Assume he killed the brother of your NPC.)

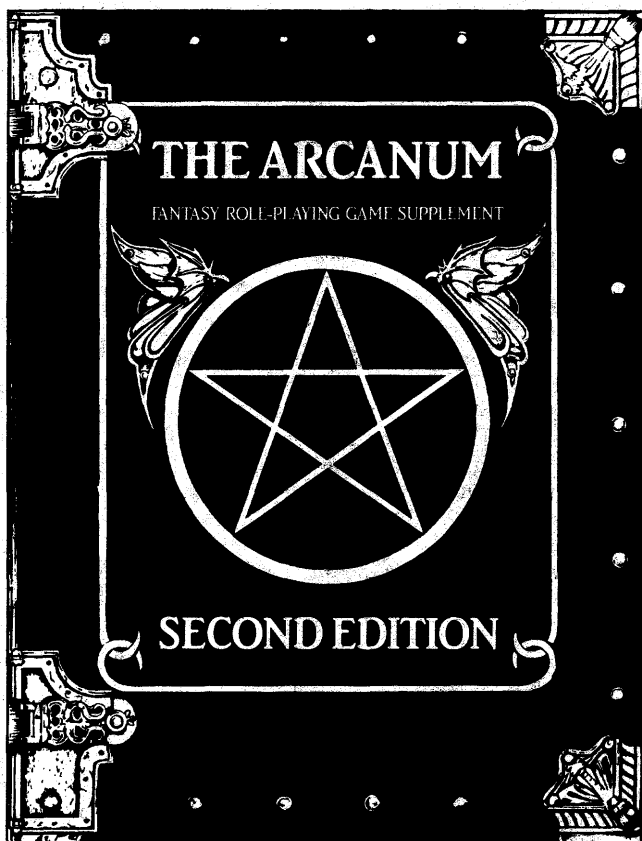
"We need to hide this map. Will you help us?"

It's also important to test your NPCs in situations that seem likely to occur in a given adventure. If you know your PCs will be searching the city for hirelings, make sure your testing session includes some appropriate questions. Testing may reveal unexpected strengths and weaknesses in your profile. If so, modify your profile and test it again.

Remember to use restraint during the actual game. It isn't necessary or advisable to prepare speeches or responses in advance. Just because your NPC warrior is a "wise guy," don't go out of your way to force in a joke. A good profile will allow you to role-play your NPCs naturally and spontaneously, and vivid profiles provided by you are sure to trigger vivid responses from the characters.

Once you get the hang of it, you'll find this three-phase system of brainstorming, refining, and testing to be an indispensable tool for role-playing NPCs. Before you know it, you'll be dazzling your players with NPCs that are so lifelike, they'll think you brought them in off the street. You don't have to tell them it's easy — in fact, as easy as 1, 2, 3.

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# Heroes are Made — Like This!

*There's much more to a superhero than superpowers*

article discusses creating and playing a character in a superhero role-playing game. The game master and player might want to violate one or two of these guidelines because they run contrary to a superhero's style. But if you violate too many, then the character is unlikely to survive long, or else the campaign will suffer from lack of role-playing input from the players and GM.

## **Power planning**

Players in superhero role-playing games usually start creating characters by determining their abilities and powers. However, a player should not worry solely about the amount of physical power his character has, even if the character worries about it. If properly used, any power, skill, or ability will become important. The GM will undoubtedly give his players the opportunity to use all the options at their disposal.

Never forget what a character can do. In a campaign I ran, five heroes were about to go to that big Danger Room in the sky. They had been captured by a villainess named Darkling, and were about to be used as power sources in a ritual of magic. All of the heroes were tied up and their known powers neutralized. As the ritual neared completion, I was just about ready to have the players start rolling new characters when Guano Jim (now known as Deva) remembered his psychic link with Lynch, a small hawk. Because he rarely used the bird, the villains did not know about it. Once Jim got in touch with the bird, it was child's play to sneak it into the villains' headquarters. There, it freed one of the heroes, who freed the others, and they made short work of the villains. Because Jim's player forgot about that one power, the characters very nearly did not survive that adventure.

The point here is that power is relative — not to other characters, but to the situation. If players have the chance to choose powers, abilities, equipment, or skills, they should do so in a way which makes each character interesting, not just trying to maximize the power level of the character.

If a character has a power that's not being used, chances are he simply hasn't found a use for it. If the power was written up in the rules, it undoubtedly has a use. However, players may want to down-play one or more of a hero's powers. Because Guano Jim rarely used his psychic link, the villains did not plan against it — they didn't know about it. None of Jim's other powers were psychic, so the villains didn't attempt to dampen his psychic ability. Keeping the villains in the dark is always useful, if it is done consciously.

## **Body and mind**

Once a supercharacter's powers are decided, take some time to flesh out the character. By now, you probably have some idea of the character's physical characteristics and personality. It is nearly impossible to go through the process of creating a character without picking up some idea of how the character will look, both physically and mentally.

Expand upon vague ideas. Be specific. If you can draw, draw a picture of your character. If not, just write everything down: height, weight, hair, eyes, skin, sex, and handedness. To describe anything out of the ordinary, use lots of adjectives. Is the character gangly? Does the character have deep blue eyes, a soft voice, a plump physique? Don't forget distinguishing characteristics. Does your character have a moustache or beard, beehive hairdo, scar, or missing left pinky? Write it all down. Picture the character clearly in your mind

"Truly it can be said that it is the man, not the powers, that make the hero."  
*The Watcher, What If #36*

Superhero role-playing games have become very popular, though they can prove to be exceptionally complicated. The players must deal with a world that is as complex and changing as the real world, because it is the real world in many ways. Only the presence of superheroes (and supervillains) makes it different.

Because of this complexity, players often ignore certain important aspects of role-playing when playing superheroes. This

and treat that picture like a sculpture. If something looks wrong, fix it. Make sure you're able to picture your character's appearance without difficulty. I once had a player decide, after his character had been established, that he wanted to change his character's skin color because the original color didn't fit the player's picture of the character. Because he was insistent, the player was allowed to make the change, which didn't affect anything that had already happened. Still, the player should have figured out this characteristic in advance. In another instance (and in a game in which handedness was determined randomly) a player decided that his character had to be right-handed. The player was right-handed and didn't think he could picture his character doing things left-handed. This may sound trifling, but if you can't picture your character correctly, you'll find it that much harder to get into the game.

Eventually, you should have a pretty good idea of your character's personality. Write down this information. Is your character slightly pessimistic, noble, occasionally erratic, or prone to follow orders? Don't forget bravery, cowardice, short tempers, kindness, cleanliness, brashness, and eccentricity.

Don't think it necessary to create extreme personalities. Some players try to create personalities that nearly qualify for inclusion in diagnostic manuals for psychologists. These aberrations often take the form of berserker or killer instinct, or pride that would put a Bostonian to shame. These characters are easy to role-play because the player can rely on stereotypes or focus on only one aspect of personality, such as pride. However, it is much more satisfying in the long run to play normal personalities. Psychotics tend to be very one-dimensional by nature. They also tend to make the game less fun for the other players, as their heroes must be wary of the psychotic hero.

If you want to play a very strange character, at least keep it three-dimensional. Limit extreme strangeness to one or two odd personality traits. A happy-go-lucky berserker is fine, but a happy-go-lucky, erratic, noble berserker is not. Expand the character's normal personality 'traits in a way that will make the character more fun to play. Maybe the character tends to go berserk when fighting, but she also values her friends highly and will usually listen when these friends try to calm her.

### Previous lives

Your character has powers, a body, and a mind; now he needs an origin. Origins cover the history of a character up to the present. Think about your character's personality; think about how it could have formed. What kind of upbringing brought this character about? You might even want to think about some specific events that happened in the character's past. Don't forget to take skills and knowledge into

account. If the character is quiet, shy, works well with animals, and knows quite a bit about farming, chances are he didn't come from New York City.

If the character has a Ph.D., Masters, or Bachelors degree, from what college was this received? What was college like for the character? Does the character still keep in touch with friends and professors? What was the character's childhood like? What is the character's occupation? Does the character like her occupation? What kind of people does the character have for relatives? What kind of people does she have for friends, and who does she hang out with when she's not adventuring? This is all included in a complete origin. All of these facts need not be determined immediately; they can be added as the game is played and the knowledge is needed.

Finally, how were the character's powers received? Were they inherent powers gained at birth? If so, how did this affect the character's childhood? If the powers were only recently gained, how did the character react to this? Have the powers changed the character's life in any way?

When you know the answers to these questions, it will become much easier to role-play and have even more fun. You will be much more involved in your character and may even be able to give your GM ideas for subplots to liven up the main adventure. Take an interest in your character's family, friends, and aspects of his history, and the good GM will occasionally incorporate them into the game.

A basic origin outline can streamline your work. Each of the following areas should be covered for a superhero:

1. Distinguishing physical characteristics (including eye color, hair color, skin, height, build, etc.).
2. Distinguishing mental traits.
3. Favorite activities.
4. Occupation(s).
5. Co-workers and superiors of importance to the character.
6. Relatives important to the character.
7. Best friends.
8. Affiliations, including:
  - a. Hometown
  - b. High school (sports, band, etc.)
  - c. College (sports, fraternity or sorority, etc.)
  - d. Professional (societies, union, etc.)
  - e. Recreational (health clubs, etc.)
9. Manner in which powers were gained, and the effects thereof.

### Secrets within secrets

It is very easy to determine whether or not your character will keep a secret identity. Ask yourself these questions:

1. Does my character have relatives or friends who are not as well-equipped as my hero to deal with megalomaniacal villains?

2. Does my character's intelligence rate above moronic?

If you answered "yes" to both questions, your character will probably keep a secret

identity. If you answered "no" to both, he probably will not. If you answered "yes" to only one, your character probably needs a secret identity, but may or may not actually keep one. Most comic-book superheroes fall into the first category.

Superheroes falling into the second category are virtually nonexistent, though many supervillains (especially the monstrous types) appear here. Examples of Marvel Universe® heroes in the third category include the Fantastic Four® and the Hulk™. The Fantastic Four, while intelligent, have few friends or relatives who are not superheroes. Bruce Banner has many friends who get into trouble because of the Hulk, but the Hulk is not (or has not been, at least) intelligent enough to worry about a secret identity. Note that Mr. and Mrs. Fantastic have realized that secret identities are useful and have tried to create them — but have discovered that this is not an easy task, and that it would have been far easier to have done so right from the start.

Why have a secret identity? Even if your character is the most powerful being on Earth, chances are her grandmother and her lover are not. Some villains have no qualms about taking revenge on people close to your character. A secret identity also gives your character the ability to rest without worrying about having villains attack him or the public mob him.

The first precaution in getting a secret identity is to change your character's appearance. The easiest way to do this is with a costume, which serves two purposes: It hides your character's identity, and it makes his superhero identity easily recognizable to friends and foes alike. If your hero (in his secret identity) and a costumed villain slug it out on the streets of New York City, the cops are likely to try to arrest both combatants but if your hero is wearing his easily recognizable red-white-and-blue costume, officers will recognize him as a hero and give him some help. Costumes also identify heroes to other heroes, making it much more likely that they will receive cooperation, and they identify heroes to the public. Crowds are less likely to panic if a costumed hero "flames on" than if some anonymous stranger bursts into flame.

The best way to mask your character's identity is by covering her face, which is the part of the body that most people use to remember acquaintances. If you do not wish your character to wear a full face mask, a Lone Ranger mask is efficient.

Hair disguise is also important. If your character has a distinctive hair style or color, this must be hidden. Don't forget beards and moustaches. These can make Lone Ranger masks nearly useless. Hair can also be useful in changing appearance. Wigs, fake beards, and fake moustaches can aid in hiding your character's identity. It is not recommended that these aids be worn in the superhero role; in an all-out battle, they are far too easy to lose.

Instead, they should be worn in the normal (secret) identity. If your character already has a beard and moustache, and they aren't too important to him, shave them off and replace them with exact replicas. Then, when changing to the superhero identity, take off the beard and moustache. Also, a wig that matches your character's hair can give a different hair style for each identity.

Glasses are great. If your character wore glasses before receiving his powers, keep them, even if they are no longer needed. If they are still needed, use contacts or goggles in the superhero identity. Combined with other factors, glasses can be a great and subtle disguising factor.

The basic idea is to make your character look different as a superhero. Anything you can do to change her physical appearance will help. If she has a power that will do this, it can also be used. The effect should be permanent, however, and not dependent on concentration. It would not do to return to normal every time your character is surprised or knocked out.

Voice changes are also important. If your character has a distinctive voice, find a way to disguise it. A face mask that covers the mouth can muffle the voice. Your character might even want to make that part of the mask thicker to muffle his voice even more. Don't go overboard, however; people need to understand what your hero's saying. If your character is a good actor or impressionist, he could even change his voice when switching identities, becoming more dramatic in his heroic role. If your character does follow this example, make sure that each voice used sounds convincing, and that your character does not goof up. If your character uses uncommon expressions ("Wild!" or "Ducky!" for example), make it a point that he does not use these in his hero role. He may even want to make up some unique ones for his heroic identity, even if they sound a little corny.

Gloves are a useful part of any costume, as fingerprints can identify almost anyone. Remember that chance and human nature are on your character's side. Villains who know her in her hero identity will find it hard to connect her with her normal personality (unless she unwittingly helps them). Likewise, the thought that this woman could be a superhero will never occur to friends and relatives who know her in her secret identity (unless she makes them suspicious). It is up to the player to make sure that others simply do not make the connection between the character's two identities.

Also be careful about where your character appears. She very likely has one built-in disadvantage: She can never appear in both her secret identity and her hero identity at the same time. Do not compound this problem by having your character's hero identity appear in every out-of-the-way place her secret identity happens to be. In these situations, she

doesn't have to change into costume to combat crime. Many powers can be used quietly and quickly, without arousing suspicion. If a villain happens to trip over a vine while escaping a heist in Hawaii, nobody's going to connect it with that tourist from Michigan (who has many secret plant-control powers).

When friends and relatives get into trouble and your character must save them, try to do so surreptitiously. Not only will extended contact with people he knows tend to make them suspicious, others will recognize that he is paying too much attention to certain people and will be able to get at his friends and relatives without even knowing his secret identity.

You may also want to do things to actually mislead those searching for your hero's identity. You could pick a certain part of the city and always have the hero arrive to fight crime as if he were coming from that part of town. If he usually swoops down from the northeast when confronting villains, people will eventually come to assume that he lives in the northeast part of the city. Tricks such as these are not hard to develop.

#### **Who to tell**

One final point about secret identities. Your character will occasionally want to trust someone with the "big secret." Certain people even have a right to know. For instance, spouses should be told; so should parents, if the hero is still living at home. In both of these cases, the affected person should be told immediately before making the decision to be a superhero. These people will be strongly affected by the decision and should be involved in the decision-making process (if the player and GM like the idea of playing this out). Friends can be sources of support when times get tough.

If your character doesn't tell them, she'd better be good at making excuses; she'll need to explain quite a bit, such as why she is consistently late for school or work, why she must cancel engagements and disappear at a moment's notice, and why she must disappear for hours at a time.

Your character may also feel the need to tell someone else: a girlfriend or boyfriend, perhaps. Chances are that they should not be told. They must not only be implicitly trustworthy now — they must be trustworthy years from now. And even if they can be trusted, they can still get themselves or your character into trouble. Anyone who knows your character's secret identity will try to contact him when he is needed. If this contact comes to the notice of one of the superhero's enemies; not only will your character be in danger, the friend will be in grave danger as well.

Your character may even feel it necessary to tell the secret to government agencies or other superheroes. Government agencies are a no-no; everything they know is on file. Anyone with the know-

how can access such information, thus, even the agency cannot be trusted. Just because the agency is friendly now doesn't mean it will always be friendly. Leadership changes hands, legislative bodies take new action, and public opinion varies. Any number of things can occur which would put your character and her friends in jeopardy. The recent events in the Captain America® comic are proof of this.

Superheroes are another story. If your character works with a certain hero or group for a long period, he will find it very useful to be able to relax with these heroes as friends in their secret identities. If protected and used properly, a secret identity is far more useful than it is a nuisance.

#### **Playing the game**

The first thing you must do as you start playing the game is find out about the campaign world. What other heroes and villains exist? Take special notice of the NPC heroes and villains taken from the comic books; they are likely to play a prominent role in the game world. Also, keep up-to-date on current events in the real world. Some of these may also occur in the game world, if the GM is on the ball.

Find out about the differences between the real world and the game world. Are there lots of super-powered beings or only a few? Is public opinion for superheroes favorable or unfavorable? Does the public know that these beings exist? One player in my campaign missed out on a decent amount of fun because he didn't listen to my introduction and didn't know that the PCs were the first and only superbeings on Earth. You will have a lot more fun and your character will have a much better chance of surviving if you know what is going on around you.

Most importantly, learn from your adventures. Don't make the same mistake twice, and don't act without thinking. If something unexpected happens, ask yourself if there is a reasonable explanation. This could save your hero's life. One adventure I ran involved the heroes in a fight with a giant, seemingly invincible robot. One of the PCs, Lightwave, was a hero who could convert his body to blue-green light. He could also emit a laser beam of the same light. When he attempted to hit the robot with the laser, the beam dissipated a few feet from its target. Meanwhile, the rest of the team were trying to see if they could get inside the robot. Lightwave thought this was a good idea, so he decided to try to dart into the robot's ear. A moment's reflection would have told him that the laser light was probably dissipated by a field of some kind surrounding the robot. Since Lightwave was made of the same energy as his laser, the field was able to dissipate him. He survived but sustained massive injuries. It was an important lesson learned at a very high cost: Think before you leap.

### The limits of power

Your character must also get to know his powers. Determine your character's limits. If she is strong, what is the maximum weight she can lift? If he has an energy blast, what is the maximum damage he can do? It is far better to learn your limits under controlled conditions (i.e., by experimenting) than in the heat of battle; this is particularly true if the GM likes to hide exact information on a character's powers.

Practice using your hero's powers at maximum potential, and practice using them at less than maximum. In the field, it is best to use attacks at half-strength or less, depending on who is being fought, unless the added power is needed. Your character is not going to make brownie points with anyone — press, public, or police — if everybody she fights ends up either dead or maimed for life. Real heroes rarely need to kill.

Using powers at less-than-maximum potential should also save energy (if the previous argument isn't suitable). If the game system used does not account for this, you may want to talk to your GM. A satisfactory system would be easy to implement. Using a power at half the normal output would use half the power requirement, and would thus make the power useable twice as often. One-third normal would use one-third the power

requirement and would thus make it useable three times as often, and so on.

Your character should also practice tricks — special uses for his powers or abilities that may not be very obvious. A trick may involve another skill or more than one power. Using telekinesis to fiddle around with the inside of a lock is a trick; not only does your character need to learn fine telekinetic manipulation, he must also learn lockpicking skills.

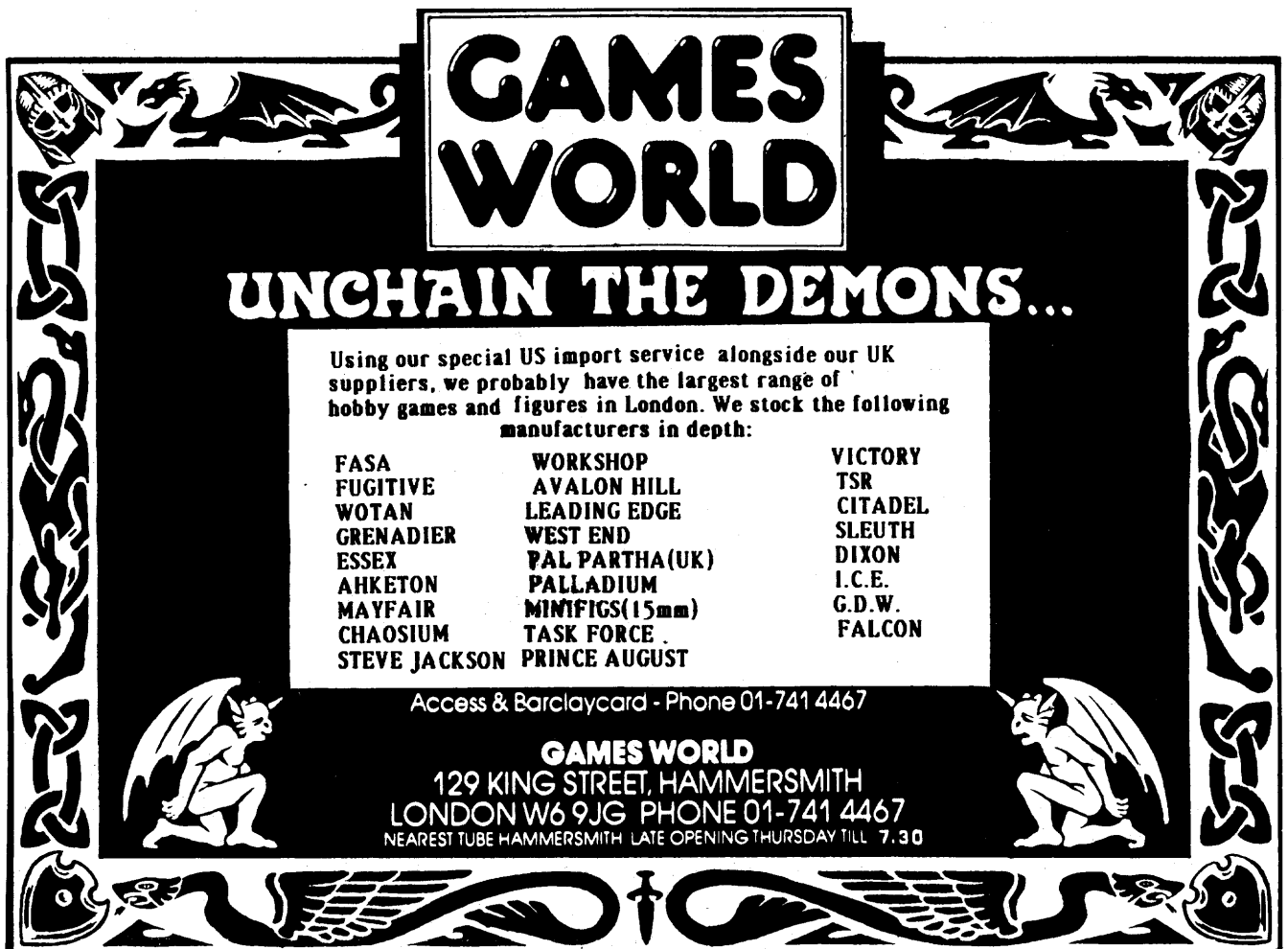
Sometimes you may come across a trick by accident, so keep your eyes open. One player in my campaign had a hero, the Lurking Grue, who knew the magical spell for invisibility. He was not very good at casting it and failed almost as often as he succeeded. Then one failure resulted in a very strange occurrence. Although the Lurking Grue didn't become invisible, various items which he was carrying did. When he realized what had happened, he cancelled the spell but took note of that effect. He reasoned that it meant this specific spell could be used selectively. Thus, it could be used to make things only partially invisible. No doubt visions of headless horsemen and bodiless smiles ran through his head, but he also found other uses for that spell. He found it simple to make a wall invisible in order to see through it, and with practice was able to safely inspect suspicious packages by

making the wrappings and box invisible. If the Grue hadn't been observant and hadn't thought about what had happened, that use would never have been realized.

### Group effort counts

At some point in your character's career, he will probably become involved with a group of heroes. There are a couple of things groups should keep in their collective minds. First, make it a point to practice together. Practice combining your various specialties into tricks that are more complex than tricks a single hero can perform. The "Fastball Special" of Marvel's Wolverine™ and Colossus™ is a prime example of this. Using Colossus's strength to throw Wolverine at extremely large, flying, or highly perched opponents allowed the two earthbound heroes to attack villains they couldn't normally reach.

Special maneuvers must also be developed. These are general, nonspecific plans for the group to follow that can work in many situations. By calling the plan "maneuver A" or "maneuver B," the leader can give instructions without informing the opposition. For example, if the group has entered combat with some villains in a fairly crowded area, the leader can tell the group to execute maneuver A. The group will then perform a series of feints and



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retreats designed to move the fight to an isolated area. This works much better than yelling "We gotta move the fight away from all these people!" thus reminding the villains (played by the GM) that there are dozens of possible diversions and hostages there for the taking.

Maneuvers should be limited to easily remembered, generally applicable instructions. Useful maneuvers can often be found by recalling what happened in a fight after the action is over. If someone must often repeat a certain set of instructions, that set of instructions is a candidate for classification as a maneuver. Likewise, if a simple plan failed because the villains heard the leader yelling it out, that plan is also a candidate for classification as a maneuver.

Choosing a leader is another very important part of being in a group. Every group of more than three heroes should have a leader to make quick decisions when speed is necessary. The basic candidate for a leader must be able to think fast under stress, be able to command, and have a good public presence.

The ability to think fast is most important. It wouldn't hurt if the leader were also highly intelligent, but quick thinking comes first. The leader must be ready to make important decisions at a moment's notice. If plan A begins to go wrong,

should the group continue or switch to plan B? If the group is attacked unexpectedly, are they going to be able to deal with the threat? If not, the group must get out immediately, and the leader must find the best means of retreat. This is a lot to ask of a player, but if he's sharp, having his hero lead pays off well.

Of course, all the intelligence and quick thinking in the world will do no good if no one follows the leader's orders. Thus, the second requirement is that the leader should be able to command, either through respect or friendship. In any case, the group must be willing to follow the leader's orders. A charismatic and enthusiastic player helps enormously here!

Finally, the group will be interacting with the public, through innocents, officials, and media. The leader will usually be the group member who communicates with the public because he is the person the public wants to talk to. A leader with good public presence (i.e., high charisma) will greatly enhance these interactions. It is the leader who will keep the group on the good side of the local public, media, and government.

#### The "real" world

Most important of all: When you are playing the game, play as if it were real. If something seems strange to you, assume it truly *is* strange. Do not assume it is strange just because the GM made a mistake or the game rules make that strange event normal. Also, do not take events in the real world as reasons for events in the game world. More than once I have seen players ignore valuable information only to find out later it was because they simply attributed it to a mistake on my part, rather than to actual events in my game world. ("Yeah, I noticed that, but I thought you just misspoke!") If you truly think the GM misspoke or the game system broke down, point this out immediately. The GM will tell you whether or not the event actually occurred.

The tendency to take real-world needs and actions as causes for game-world

events can be much more subtle. At one point in the campaign previously mentioned, in which the PCs and one NPC were the only superheroes, the NPC hero died. The players know I prefer to have an NPC in the group, so they expected me to create another one. At the same time in the game world, ROC (the major criminal organization) was devising a plan to infiltrate the Lugnuts (the players' group) using a very elaborate scheme. ROC took a man, created an identity and a history that explained his knowledge of ROC, and fed it all to the man through hypnosis. One night while the Lugnuts were sitting around eating reheated pizza, there was a knock on their door, and in walked "Sandy."

"I understand you're after ROC," Sandy said. "I am, too. I'd like to join forces with you."

"How do you know about ROC?" was the inevitable question.

"I've been chasing them for many years." "Why?"

"They . . . they killed my daughter. I'd rather not talk about it."

And the Lugnuts believed it. These heroes had been in touch with the CIA; according to their contact, the CIA knew little about ROC except its name. Sandy claimed to know names, office locations — the works. There wasn't complete acceptance, however. One player stated that he was suspicious and was going to keep an eye on Sandy. But there was no attempt to check out the man's story or his background.

The result: The heroes were led straight into a trap. On the way to that trap, they picked up and passed on so much disinformation that the CIA now knows less than nothing about ROC. Both the players and the CIA believe ROC has been all but destroyed. *C'est la vie des fous.*

In short, use your head in superhero games. They're tough, but they're the best there are.

Ω

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by Jape Trostle

# Fifty Ways to Foil Your Players

## *NPC sometimes stands for Not Particularly Cooperative*

Life for a player character in a role-playing game can (and should) be perilous. But not everyone a game master creates in a campaign is out to kill the PCs; some just want to disturb their sanity. The next time your players are gearing up to take on some deadly nemesis or dangerous dungeon, add a few NPC foils to the game to enliven things.

While every good campaign has a wide variety of NPCs to encounter, foils are a special breed. Foils are specifically designed by the GM to antagonize a party of characters or an individual PC. Foils are colorful, meddling nuisances. They are uninvited and unwelcome minor obstacles that perpetually pop up in the PCs' lives — always when least desired and expected. Foils plague the players and exploit any foibles their characters may have by contrasting the PCs' personalities. Of course, the foils don't see it this way; it just *seems* like their purpose in life is to drive the players nuts.

This is not unrealistic. Just think of some people you know who regularly rub you the wrong way. Doesn't it seem like they antagonize you deliberately? Of course, sometimes that is the case....

However irritating foils may be, most are not very dangerous, and they can often provide comic relief as well as give a twist to the old adventure routine. The foil is not an NPC class; it is simply any NPC personality type who consistently thwarts the PCs in minor ways. This article provides 50 character stereotypes, each fol-

lowed by a short description, to assist the GM in creating foils to fit any campaign and the players involved. GMs are expected to develop those foils that appeal to them, so only a brief outline of each type is provided. It should be kept in mind that foils are nuisances and should pose no *immediate* physical threat to the PCs, so most should be relatively inexperienced. Race, sex, alignments, and so forth are usually irrelevant, and foils can appear as individuals or as groups. Although the listed foils are described for use in a medieval or fantasy game, they fit into any RPG scenario. Just picture their counterparts in science-fiction, superhero, espionage, and similar settings.

### **Individual foils**

1. *The tax man:* What more need be said? He is greedy, persistent, unpleasant, and always there — especially when the PCs return from a successful adventure. He is an oily snake who enjoys nothing better than squeezing that extra coin from the PCs' purse. He'll badger the PCs about town, showing up at their door or favorite tavern. The tax man is highly intelligent and shrewd — and he always has government backing. Without taxes, where would the local government be?

2. *The fool:* This giggling, cackling jester cannot — and will not — shut up. He is always talking, joking, lying, boasting (he likes to boast about the PCs' abilities to rivals and opponents), and ridiculing others. As a result, he will probably get the

PCs into more trouble than they can get out of. This foil has an above-normal intelligence and dexterity, with below-average wisdom, and shows up in taverns and on street corners.

3. *The creditor:* If the PCs have ever borrowed money or are escaping bad debts, the creditor and his agents are sure to be on their trails. The creditor goes wherever a debt goes. A creditor could take any shape, but has the persistence of a bounty-hunting Scrooge. Repo men are also of concern here.

4. *The landlord:* This mousy little man or woman is always eavesdropping, prying, and raising the rent. The landlord is convinced the PCs are up to no good and wants to know what's going on. The landlord is only found in the inn or apartment where the PCs are staying.

5. *The ignoble noble:* This stuffy, self-righteous lord or lady looks down at everyone — especially the PCs. Loud, pretentious, obnoxious, arrogant, and rich, the ignoble noble does not have one wit of common sense. This pompous, petty noble abuses the PCs ("Out of my way, lout!") until needing their services — which, of course, are assumed to be always at his disposal. Ignoble nobles can be found in elite establishments, at court, out hunting, or traveling between these places.

6. *The religious zealot:* This priest or follower of some obscure religion is always preaching against the evils of the PCs' ways, no matter how good the PCs might be. Even paladins do not measure up to the zealot's standards. Wherever found — be it street corner, tavern, or temple — the religious zealot is always up on a soapbox, with the PCs as targets.

7. *The gambler:* Never obvious, this slick game player is out to take the PCs for everything they have — again, again, and again. The gambler has a high intelligence, good looks, and is very charismatic and persuasive. The gambler can be found in taverns, on corners, and at games and tournaments — any place where people gamble.

8. *The con man:* What the gambler doesn't take, this foil will. Fake treasure maps, dummy magical weapons, bogus potions — the con man has them all. He is slick and smooth, and has above-average intelligence and charisma. By nature of his precarious position, the con man is always on the move and can thus be found in a wide variety of places. Although most of his wares are worthless, the con man will once in a great while (and without his knowledge) sell something that is genuine. In these instances, since he was unaware of its validity at the point of sale, he will probably want it back if he finds out. A prime example of a con man is Mr. Henney from the TV series *Green Acres*, or a

snake-oil salesman from the Old West.

9. *The merchant*: One step above the con man, the merchant's items are quite real. However, this fast-tongued fellow will always try to sell the PCs something they do not need. If he is a traveling salesman, he could show up anywhere (like that time he tried to sell pole arms to kobolds in the local dungeon). Cyrano Jones from the *Star Trek* episode "The Trouble With Tribbles" is a good example of this type.

10. *The doorman*: Whether a bouncer at a tavern or gate guard at a keep, the doorman will never simply let the PCs walk through the door. His job is to keep people out, and that means the PCs. Even if he has orders to show the PCs in, he will do so grudgingly. Of course, he needs the brawn to back up his job, so a high strength and constitution are recommended, though he does not necessarily have to be a fighter.

11. *The jealous lover or lover's spouse*: Amorous PCs who pursue several lovers at once run the risk that a cheated lover or spouse will find out and come after the PC in question. The foil is usually an important and influential figure, such as a powerful merchant or official. Whoever the jilted lover is, the PC is bound for trouble!

12. *The catty lover*: This is a particularly jealous and troublesome lover who is never satisfied with peace and quiet. He or she constantly generates a hurricane of problems for the PC to which he or she is attached, though the PC may find it hard to give up the relationship.

13. *The would-be mate*: This is someone who believes he or she would make the perfect mate for one of the PCs. This is also someone who does not know the meaning of the word "no." This foil is usually undesirable in one measure or another, having poor looks, a loud mouth, a pushy personality, or terrible personal hygiene.

14. *The PC's relative*: This foil needs little explanation. If the relative doesn't want money, he or she has "someone nice" (usually a would-be suitor) for the PC to meet. A relative's favorite saying is "Blood is thicker than water."

15. *The captain of the guard*: For some reason, the captain doesn't like the looks of the PCs and will harass them whenever they are in town. He knows they are up to no good, and even if they aren't, he will make something up. Although a hindrance, the captain is only a minor threat, as his ego is greater than his fighting ability. Since he is a somewhat commanding character, the captain should have an above-average charisma. He can be found making his rounds about the town or dropping in on the PCs to let them know that he still has his eye on them. Local sheriffs also fit this role.

16. *The town official*: This foil, usually a mayor, councilor, or burgher, gives the words "inept" and "bungling" true meaning. Usually fat and lazy, the loud and self-important town official never really knows what is going on around him. Always image conscious, the town official shows up at various functions and events about town, and his opinions on current events change like the wind.

17. *The dandy*: A foppish, arrogant lad, always dressed in the latest fashion, the dandy is quite a fair-weather friend. He insists on being seen with the PCs if they are successful and popular, and ridicules them if they are not. Either way, the dandy always acts as a superior to the PCs because they don't dress as well as he does. This handsome, foolish fop can be found in taverns or any place that might make him look good.

18. *The fledgling bard*: This would-be minstrel is on the lookout for heroes to interview so he can compose his first great epic. Found in and around taverns, inns, and any place else adventuring types might gather, this scraggly lad sings out of tune and plays the lute horribly.

19. *The matriarchal goodwife*: This clucking hen either berates the PCs for not coming up to her own impeccable moral standards or, if the PCs are upstanding citizens such as paladins or good clerics, constantly plays matchmaker for the hapless characters. Found in the marketplace or hanging out the window of her home (gossiping), this large, tough woman won't take lip from anyone, and believes that no one (except nobility) is above a good thrashing.

20. *The mad prophet*: This insane old geezer is the butt of many jokes around the town and countryside. He wanders about aimlessly and without direction, often showing up in unusual places. Dirty and ragged, the mad prophet talks to himself and makes little sense. Sometimes, however, he speaks of things that do come true — perhaps he's a little psychic as well as psychotic.

21. *The old soldier*: This old, withered warrior loves nothing better than pulling up a chair to the PCs' table and telling lots of unbelievable yarns about the good old days. Adorned in rusted armor, he talks and talks, occasionally dropping some important fact in the PCs' laps — if they are still listening, that is.

22. *The would-be adventurer*: This small boy or girl (or group of children) adopts a PC as a role model. This foil will follow the party about, imitating everything the PCs do. Would-be adventurers are only found around towns and villages, and only until their mothers call them in for bedtime.

23. *The loyal dog*: When a would-be adventurer reaches adolescence and is still



hanging around the player characters, he becomes a loyal dog, willing to do anything for the PCs. Awkward and gangly, the loyal dog's enthusiasm gets in the way as he rushes about doing favors for the PCs. The reason these foils are called loyal dogs is because the PCs always find them underfoot.

24. *The crush*: Similar to the loyal dog, this is an adolescent whose first crush is on one of the PCs. The crush will do anything for a "beloved" — except leave the PC alone.

25. *The apprentice magic-user*: This bright though bungling kid is apprenticed off to a low-level, unadventurous magic-user who likes to stay put in town. The apprentice, however, dreams of adventure and likes to hang around the PCs. Likewise, he always wants to show the adventurers the latest cantrip he's learned. Unlike would-be adventurers or loyal dogs, the apprentice actually has a useful (if weak) skill. A knight's squire fits this category as well.

26. *The street urchin*: The young street urchin loves nothing better than following the PCs around town and taunting them. He is amazingly fast, both in dexterity and intelligence. This foil is a real pain but knows the surrounding area better than anyone. There is a chance (25%) that the street urchin is a low-level thief.

27. *The younger sibling*: This very young (12 years old or less) sister or brother of one of the PCs wants to be just like the older sibling. In other instances, the PC is the child's guardian, and the sibling

refuses to obey the PC. Either way, the younger sibling is troublesome.

28. *The unwanted pet*: This small animal adopts the PCs, usually after they have innocently fed the beast when it was hungry. This pet will follow (often quite loudly) the PCs anywhere, even into battle or into a dungeon. The pet is usually a cat, dog, or other domesticated animal, but could have a serious defense mechanism (like a skunk).

29. *The adoring monster*: If the PCs have ever spared some small, semi-intelligent creature from death (for example, a kobold), the grateful monster is bound to show up later, latch onto the group, and try to prove its worth to its saviors. Unlike unwanted pets, an adoring monster is unusual and can be powerful and (relatively) intelligent.

30. *The bumbling bartender*: This friendly, forgetful butterball always means well, which does not keep him from being a bumbling idiot. He can run a tavern either in a town or out in the countryside. Butterbur, the innkeeper at The Prancing Pony in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, is a good example.

31. *The brainless brute*: The town bully is out to prove he is the toughest around by beating up all the small guys he can get his hands on. His strength is equal to his cowardice; he talks big, but he rarely backs up his words with action.

32. *The reveler*: Loud, obnoxious, and always broke, this happy-go-lucky fellow is always ready to knock back a few with his favorite adventurers — as long as they pay. A large fellow with an enormous appetite and thirst, the reveler knows hundreds of bad jokes and tall tales, and will tell them all if given the opportunity. Shakespeare's Falstaff is such a reveler.

33. *The overzealous soldier*: This soldier, usually a low-level fighter in the city guard or army, is a loyal patriot of whatever kingdom, nation, fief, or empire in which the PCs happen to find themselves. The overzealous soldier knows more about rules and regulations than fighting, and is constantly suspicious of the PCs and their activities. He sees plots where there are none.

34. *The snitch*: Spindly and thin, the snitch resembles a rat more than a man. If he isn't telling the PCs about others' plans, they can be sure he's telling others of theirs. This motormouth is always spouting names, places, rumors, and lies. He can usually be found slinking about dark alleys and taverns, trying to eavesdrop on any and all conversations.

35. *The inventor*: This clever, little, old, white-haired fellow is a mechanical genius — well, sometimes. He sees the PCs as just the people to try out his new contraptions, even though most of his creations don't work at all the way they are supposed to. Every so often, though, he comes up with a gem. Highly intelligent, the inventor can usually be found in his shop or out trying to perfect his inventions. More often than

not, however, he will be out looking for PC volunteers.

36. *The hapless hermit*: A quiet, mystical man, the hermit is never found in a populated area, but in a secluded place where he can contemplate reality. Unfortunately, he has the misfortune to pick secluded spots that the PCs eventually stumble across. Each time he is disturbed, he searches out another place, which the PCs also stumble across. Long-bearded and eccentric, the hermit's patience with unwelcome (i.e., all) visitors is short.

37. *The lady in distress*: This is a feisty wench who always manages to get in some sort of trouble from which she needs rescuing, usually when the PCs are nearby. Whether a serving girl with a smart mouth or a noble lady who has a bad habit of being kidnapped regularly, this foil should keep the PCs busy. As a rule of thumb, the damsel usually has a high charisma and a low wisdom (otherwise, she would learn to stay out of trouble). She is not necessarily romantically inclined toward a PC. Another form of this NPC is the "man overboard," usually a careless adventurer who overestimates his abilities and is always in deep trouble, from which PCs must rescue him.

38. *The seductress*: Once her sights are set on one of the PCs (or the whole group for that matter!), this *femme fatale* won't stop until the PC is hers, body and soul. Although beautiful, she is sly, devious, resourceful, and persistent in her game of love. And she does not have to be of low social status; she could be a lady of high society. The male version of this foil for the female PC is the *Don Juan*, identical in all respects. Unlike other potential mates, this one is often domineering, selfish, and rarely faithful.

39. *The vestal virgin*: This unobtainable, untouchable figurehead of a temple or kingdom, such as a young high priestess or princess of extreme beauty, has fallen in unrequited love with one of the PCs. She is entirely naive and innocent in the ways of politics and love, and does not realize that her affections could cause problems — especially for the PCs. Because of her position, approaching the vestal virgin is taboo, and being caught with her is punishable by death.

### Group foils

40. *The party people*: These roving packs of dandies and revelers are out to have a good time — at the PCs' expense. Young, boisterous, loud, and looking for trouble, the party people can be found late at night in the streets and hopping from tavern to tavern.

43. *The court schemers*: These conniving, petty nobles have plans for advancement at the royal court — plans that usually involve the PCs. Court schemers usually have a favor or errand that needs to be done, and are sure to put in a good word to the king for themselves. Their plots are full of intrigue, but their wisdom

scores are low. These foils are found in and around capital cities where there is a royal court.

42. *The city guard*: In this case, it is not the captain of the guard who holds the grudge against the PCs, it is the rest of the guard. This group always picks fights with the PCs, looks for reasons to harass them, accuses them of crimes they didn't commit, or sets them up for embarrassing situations. The players should remember that the city generally looks down on anyone killing a member of the city guard.

43. *The brothel*: This horde of harlots is constantly ready to tempt the good PCs (especially those who have taken vows), or scorn the less savory PCs' advances. "Nothing should ever be easy — or free" is their motto. This group is only found in or in front of a house of ill-repute in the less savory parts of town.

44. *The marks*: These low-level NPCs have actually bought items from the con man, and they run into the PCs while using the objects (items such as a fake treasure map that marks the treasure's location right in the PCs' home keep, or the flying carpet that only flies "when it feels like it"). There is a great potential for comedy with these foils; just picture Laurel and Hardy in a role-playing game!

45. *The thieves' guild*: The guild elders in the town or city in which the PCs currently reside have established that the PCs' party is a "practice group" for all the fledgling thieves, and that they are to be fleeced at every opportunity by the apprentices. (And the PCs would not want to bring the wrath of the entire guild on their heads because of a dead footpad or two, would they?)

46. *The unfriendly guild*: In a town or city where every form of commerce is controlled by one guild or another, the one guild the PCs rely upon the most (be it Weapons Guild, Alchemists Guild, Merchants Guild, or Magic-User Material Component Supply Guild) is the one guild that doesn't like the PCs.

47. *The orphanage*: Woe to the PCs, for this is an entire building full of street urchins, would-be adventurers, and crushes who enjoy nothing more than playing every practical joke conceivable (such as chamber-pot bombs dropped from the roof, spurs placed under a saddle, or grease wiped on sword handles) on the hapless PCs. Of course, these demons instantly transform into perfect angels whenever the headmaster is about.

### Special foils

The three foils listed hereafter are special foils for several reasons. All three can be used to start entire adventures, so they are not just casual encounters. All three could prove to be dangers to the PCs' lives and limbs, though that is not always the case. Finally, all three have different purposes than merely annoying NPCs or groups of characters.

48. *The unknown entity*: This can be a



powerful, playful, flippant godling who amuses himself by popping in and out of the PCs' lives. Sometimes he helps them and sometimes he leaves them in the lurch, but he always leaves them without a clue as to what's going on. This foil must be played carefully so the PCs do not come to depend on it too much. Tolkien's Tom Bombadil is a good example of such a character. Invariably, the PCs are being steered toward some larger goal in the entity's plans — perhaps to literally save the world.

49. *The rival(s)*: This is a rival for one of the PCs or a group of rivals for the whole group. Rivals should be adventurers of the same levels and similar classes as the PCs (with a few variations thrown in to make things interesting) who are constantly competing with the PC party for whatever the current goal is. This group should keep the PCs on their toes and make cooperation among the PCs more likely, as it also adds an element of pressure to the proceedings. A foil such as this can add incentive to the game, as the PCs not only try to overcome their current goal (be it dungeon or quest), but also attempt to beat their rivals to it. Rivals, of course, are not necessarily evil — they are just rivals.

50. *The case of mistaken identity*: If played right, this foil can be a real laugh. The case of mistaken identity involves a coincidence in which one of the PCs just happens to look like some NPC of whom the party has never heard. Other NPCs are constantly mistaking the PC for this other person, which is not good, for this other person apparently has the entire town and countryside looking for him because of something he has done (which is often bad). The poor PC is then always accused of being this lowlife, who is quite a cad and scoundrel. This scenario can be very effective if the PCs decide to go after this rogue and straighten things out. To make things interesting, though, the PCs are also unable to find him; they find only his trail of broken hearts, busted heads, bad debts, and angry enemies.

### How to play foils

This list of foils is designed to aid the GM in creating colorful NPCs and potentially interesting encounters. As they are only suggestions, the GM can develop the foils as he sees fit. But above all, foils should be fun and should provide lively subplots for a campaign.

A foil should be designed with the PCs in mind. If a GM has an idea of what best irks the PC (or the player, for that matter), then that trait should be incorporated into the NPC. If, for instance, the PCs are particularly gold-hungry, the tax man is a good antagonist. If the PCs enjoy a rousing night on the town every night, the captain of the guard would be a suitable foil. Perhaps the reveler would be the choice for a PC that is quiet and subdued, such as a studious magic-user. For those PCs that flirt with the opposite sex, the jealous or

catty lover is bound to show up. And if the PCs are politically active, the ignoble noble, the court schemers, or the town official would be appropriate.

Then again, a foil could just be a pest. The fledgling bard, the loyal dog, and the unwanted pet are all cases of foils who don't know when they have worn out their welcome. If the PCs fancy themselves as rescuers of fair maidens everywhere, then the lady who needs constant rescuing ought to keep them entertained and on the run — until they collapse from exhaustion.

Foils do not have to be human; any race can bring its own peculiar traits to the role of antagonist. A halfling can be just as exasperating as any human. The Halfling Thieves Guild from the classic DRAGON Magazine comic "Finieus Fingers" is a perfect (if lethal) example of this. Race itself can act as a foil to some characters: Imagine a party of elves having to deal with a guild run by dwarves. In whatever case, a foil can be introduced in the campaign to goad just one of the PCs or the entire party at once, so the various NPCs can be molded to fit a particular temperament or scenario. It is all up to the GM.

A majority of the NPCs listed above are noted for being found in and around cities and towns. This is assuming that most of the encounters of the foil kind will occur as the PCs are recuperating between big adventures that take place in dungeons and the wilderness. However, this does not mean the PCs could not run into a foil in the most unlikely of places. Foils can show up before, during, or after an adventure in any place the GM wants them. Naturally, some encounters are more likely than others. The ignoble noble could be found while out on a hunt or visiting a foreign kingdom where the PCs are currently exploring a dungeon; the mad prophet could be seen in a far-off forest preaching to the trees; and the marks, the rivals, the merchant, or the unknown entity could show up anywhere.

Foils also give good lessons in restraint: PCs should never be easily rid of one, and there should be no hack-and-slash response to the problem. These encounters should only be solved by employing wit, guile, and ingenious role-playing. Some NPCs are so harmless that severe repercussions should occur if the PCs kill one. For those not-so-harmless or innocent foils, the PCs will want to think twice before trying to permanently dispose of them. These NPCs will be backed by some organization or benefactor which would make life rather uncomfortable for the PCs if anything fatal were to happen to the foil. (Of course, a good thrashing might not hurt.) Nonviolent solutions, however, should be encouraged. In fact, experience points should be awarded for the more clever retorts. Foils are a test of wit and ingenuity, not of strength and weaponry.

A prime example of how to foil a foil is the crafty solution arrived at by a party in a recent campaign of this GM. The PCs

had been plagued by one very snobbish ignoble noble. For various reasons, he was using his political influence to make the PCs look bad to local officials. The PCs could not confront him directly, for he had a very high profile with many connections and supporters. Instead, they began a rumor that he had contracted a socially unacceptable disease, one of the symptoms of which was premature baldness. Then, during a large banquet attended by both the PCs and the noble, the group's magic-user got close enough to the noble to cast the cantrip *hair loss* on him, and his long, curly locks promptly fell into his soup (notch one for the players). The embarrassed noble soon departed for an extended vacation and was never again as bad a thorn in the PCs' collective side.

Alas, solutions tend to be temporary where foils are concerned. These NPCs will probably be back, much to the players' chagrin. As a result, foils should not always spell trouble. About the time they completely wear out their welcome and the PCs are pushed to the point of strangling them, the foils should drop some vital information the players can use: a clue to a current mystery, information on an enemy, the whereabouts of a needed item or map — anything to stave off the PCs' wrath. Perhaps the GM could have the foil help the PCs out of a difficult, life-threatening situation. (A foil likes nothing better than gratitude.)

A well-played foil will cultivate an interesting love/hate relationship with the PCs. However, if the PCs catch on and deliberately seek out the foil for help or information, they should discover that the NPC is now harder to find than he was to lose before. (And if found, the foil should be suspicious and defensive about the PCs seeking him out.) If sought in such a manner, foils will not freely give the help or information that is desired. Thus, foils can get the PCs coming and going.

Too much of a good thing can bog down a game; consequently, NPC foils should not be overused. Too many foils can cause too much frustration among the players and limit their enjoyment of the game. It is recommended that no more than two or three NPCs be encountered over a period of time as full-time antagonists. After using them awhile, the GM should have them disappear off the scene to pop up unpredictably in the future. The reaction from a player on seeing the return of an old foil is often remarkable.

Such characters, when played to the hilt and with a touch of humor, can turn previously forgettable NPC encounters into events as memorable as any perilous dungeon or deadly dragon.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following for their suggestions regarding types of foils (and who are effective foils themselves): Rick Caldwell, Dann Caldwell, and Brent Trostle.

# “Who Was That Masked Android?”

## How to keep a super hero's identity a real secret!

by Marcus L. Rowland

Super heroes with secret identities are often extraordinarily careless. Flimsy covers that wouldn't last five minutes in the real world are expected to stand up to the scrutiny of hostile and friendly intelligence agencies, the media, police, friends, relatives, co-workers, employers, and other heroes—no matter what.

We all know that the world isn't like that. The technology of identification is highly developed and uses dozens of forensic and investigative techniques. It's virtually impossible to do anything without leaving evidence: fingerprints, photographs, saliva, skin particles, hair, blood, etc. And these aren't the only ways we affect our surroundings. Modern society runs on records, and anyone who seems to behave abnormally risks attracting the attention of tax agencies, the police, and a variety of other authorities. It's difficult enough for anyone to drop out of sight in our own world, but in a super-powered world, most agencies could call on the help of their own super-agents with a range of unusual talents that could easily track down almost any hero or villain. Add the scrutiny of the press to these factors, and it seems unlikely that a real-world super hero could stay hidden for long.

Having said this, it should be remembered that comic-book heroes are usually able to survive such scrutiny even if their disguises are nothing more than changes in hair styles or the wearing (or removal) of glasses or tiny masks.

It's sometimes difficult to understand why super heroes bother with secret identities, which often seem more trouble than they're worth. But the main reason for their use is to give heroes (and villains) a private life that isn't continually interrupted by the press and assassination attempts. For the Advanced MARVEL SUPER HEROES™ game, activities in one's secret identity are important in restoring and maintaining Karma; this becomes almost impossible if the character can't maintain a normal private life.

This article presents a rating system for a new ability score, Secrecy, intended for use as a rough guide to the security of heroes and villains. Check if there is any major change at the end of each adventure; if the final rating falls below Typical, the hero may be due for some problems.

All aspects of the rating system are heavily biased toward heroes; only the most careless will suddenly learn that The Daily Bugle has published their secret identities, or find hit men waiting in their apartments after a hard day of crimefighting. This system has been tailored for compatibility with the Advanced MARVEL SUPER HEROES game, but it can easily be adapted to any other game.

To calculate the Secrecy rating, the hero must be assessed for each of the following factors: Disguise, Precautions, Confidants, Profile (Secret), Profile (Super), Concealment, and Karma. When all factors are assessed, add the points for each factor and divide by seven to get the final Secrecy rating.

Some of the heroes and villains mentioned below do not currently maintain secret identities; Secrecy ratings instead reflect an earlier period of the character's career or a potential rating. A few examples have been left blank, where no character seemed to fit the circumstances described. For the purposes of this article, anything said about the secret identities of heroes also applies to villains.

### Disguise

Does the hero wear gloves, a mask, or any other disguise? Does the character change shape or size? These factors can make identification easy or almost impossible. The ratings suggested below are only guidelines and should be modified for unusual cases. Under most circumstance, a disguise should never be better than Monstrous in effect.

*Feeble:* A total lack of care about secrecy is shown, apart from a clothing change. (Northstar)

*Poor:* Flimsy precautions are taken, such as wearing a domino mask. (Shadowcat)

*Typical:* A cowl mask and gloves, possibly with a costume that covers the arms, are worn. (Daredevil)

*Good:* The costume covers the hero's entire body. (Spider-Man)

*Excellent:* The hero's costume incorporates padding or armor that alters his body shape, or the hero has powers that cause minor changes in his physical form. (Iron Man, She-Hulk)

*Remarkable:* The hero's costume or powers cause substantial changes in his

physical form. (Colossus)

*Incredible:* The hero's costume or powers substantially alter his size and form. (Hulk, Thing)

*Amazing:* The hero's costume or powers cause radical physical transformations. (Human Torch when "flamed on")

*Monstrous:* The hero has an unusual or extremely thorough disguise, involving a total physical change, different body, etc. (Thor/Donald Blake)

**Acting talents:** If the character is skilled as an actor or similar performer, and he uses the skill to enhance his disguise, this may cause a shift of 1-3 columns on his rating, as follows:

Occasional amateur actor/performer: +1 CS

Professional performer (but not an actor): +2 CS

Professional actor: + 3 CS

This assumes that the character automatically uses his skill to change his voice and posture as a super hero.

### Precautions

Does the character try to avoid any connection between his secret and super identity, or are the two closely associated by common friends and interests? For example, Peter Parker has an uncanny knack of finding Spider-Man in action; how long will it be before someone puts two and two together? Under most circumstances, this rating should not exceed Incredible.

*Feeble:* An obvious public relationship between a hero's secret and super identities exists; people know of the dual identity but lack evidence to prove it. (Kingpin)

*Poor:* Many obvious links exist between a hero's secret and super identities. (Spider-Man)

*Typical:* Evidence of a link between the two identities exists, such as a similarity of resources and skills. (Iron Man)

*Good:* No obvious links exist between the two identities, but some unusual associations could be found by investigation. (Daredevil)

*Excellent:* No links exist between the two identities, apart from living in same city or area. (Thor/Donald Blake)

*Remarkable:* The hero's super identity is mainly active in another city or country. (Nightcrawler)

*Incredible:* The hero's super identity is mainly active on other planets or in other dimensions. (Doctor Strange)

### Confidants

Does anyone know the hero's secret identity? Even the most reliable friend might be unable to resist dropping a few hints, or might be tortured or brain-washed to reveal the information. This category also includes any enemies who might know an identity but have not yet broadcast it.

*Feeble:* The hero's secret identity is known to at least one major enemy or many civilians. (Daredevil)

*Poor:* The secret identity is known to friends, relatives, or government agencies. (Shadowcat, Black Widow)

*Typical:* The secret identity is known to several civilians. (Iron Man)

*Good:* The secret identity is known to one trustworthy civilian or 2-5 heroes. (Scarlet Witch)

*Excellent:* The secret identity is known to one other hero. (Spider-Man)

*Remarkable:* The hero is a loner, and his secret identity is never revealed to anyone. (Punisher)

*Incredible:* Because of amnesia or multiple personality, the hero's secret identity does not know of his super identity.

*Amazing:* The hero's powers are manifested in a way that leaves no evidence of heroic involvement, or the hero is not aware of his use of his powers. ("Licorice" Calhoun)

### Profile (Secret)

Is the secret identity a newsworthy figure or a total nonentity? Newsworthy figures are more likely to be noticed if

they make revealing slips, and they are often under the surveillance of police, intelligence agencies, criminals, news reporters, etc.

*Feeble:* The hero's secret identity is a global figure (the head of a major state, a member of royalty, a religious leader, a pop star, etc.). Everyone in the world knows of this person. (Victor Von Doom)

*Poor:* The secret identity is a national figure (American senator, head of a minor state, business tycoon, TV star, nobleman) known to many people in one country, but he is not globally famous. (Mariko Yashida, T'Challa)

*Typical:* The secret identity is regionally famous (a well-known journalist on a city paper, a prominent local industrialist, mayor, etc.) or is known to a few hundred thousand people by name (e.g., an author), but is not a major national or international figure. (Anthony Stark, Peter Parker)

*Good:* About 500-5000 people know of the secret identity by face, name, or reputation. He may be a lawyer, doctor, teacher, director, etc. (Dr. Donald Blake)

*Excellent:* About 50-500 people know of the secret identity, who may be a clerk, security guard, retired person, etc.

*Remarkable:* About 5-50 people know the name of the secret identity, who may be a technician who only meets a few clients, an unpublished author, a night watchman, etc. (Clint Barton)

*Incredible:* The secret identity is known to 1-5 others, such as a spouse or relatives. (Rachel Summers)

*Amazing:* No one knows the character's secret identity. The character could be unmasked on nationwide TV and wouldn't be recognized by anyone. (Red Skull, Scourge)

### Profile (Super)

Is the super-character well known or a total nonentity? Prominent heroes are more likely to be monitored by intelligence agencies, the police, and supervillains. This rating is often related to the hero's Popularity, but there should not be a direct relationship. A hero dropping from 50 to 0 in Popularity because of a particularly stupid mistake would become more famous, not less!

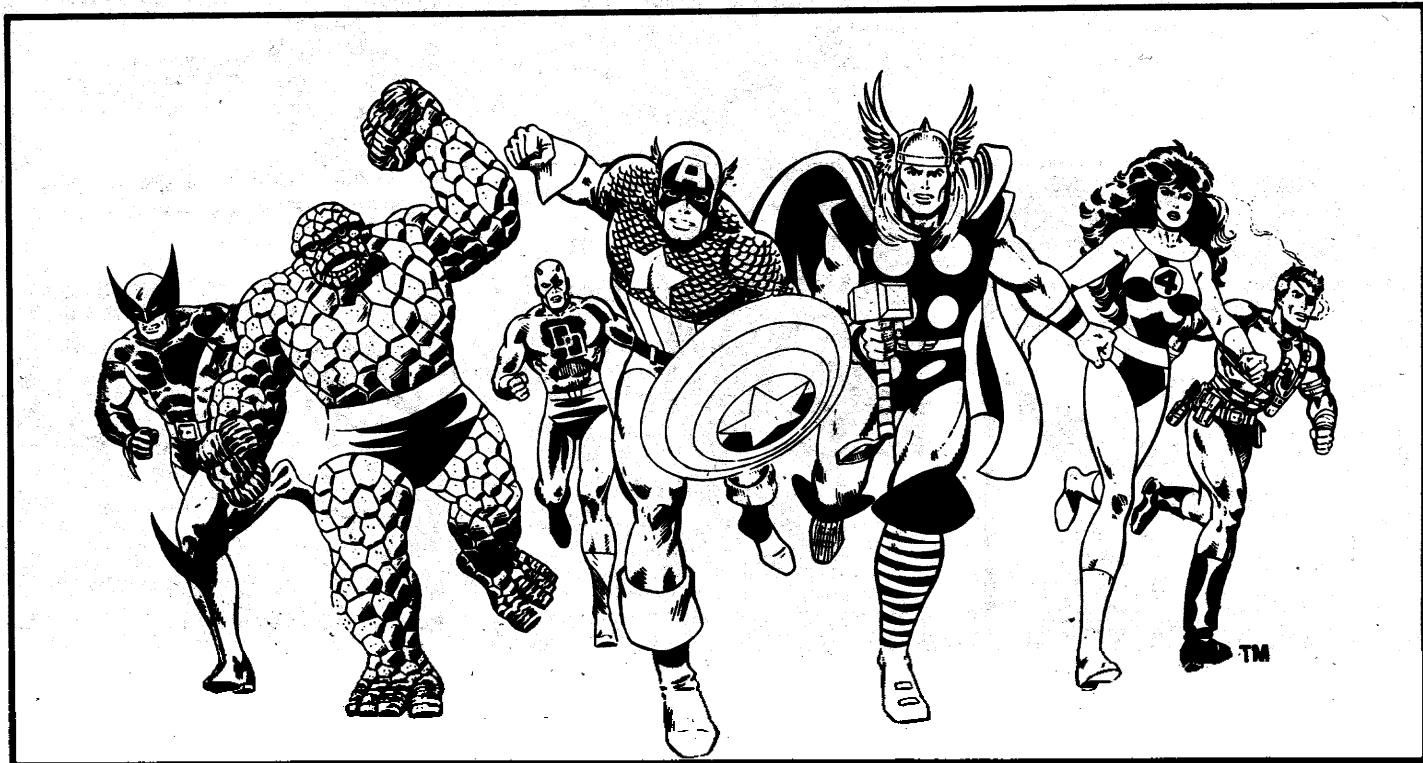
*Feeble:* Everyone in the world knows of this character. If a hero, the character is followed by a fan club and besieged by groupies. Both heroes and villains are always under observation by the police and intelligence agencies. In the case of villains, any appearance is always the signal for major countermeasures by military and intelligence forces. (Captain America, Galactus, Doctor Doom)

*Poor:* Famous on an international or national level, this character is usually monitored by intelligence agencies and foreign spies; (Red Skull, Thor)

*Typical:* The character is famous, probably one of the top half-dozen heroes or villains in the country, and he is frequently pursued by the press, spies, etc. (Mr. Fantastic)

*Good:* The character is moderately well-known, with a reputation that probably extends to several cities. He receives routine attention from police and intelligence agencies. (Black Knight)

*Excellent:* Though not the premier hero or villain of a city, the character tries hard. He is occasionally pursued by the press, but his activities are rarely the main concern of any national or international agency. (Mockingbird, Spider-Man)



*Remarkable:* One of the crowd, the character is probably only remembered as "one of those super guys." The average man in the street is unlikely to be able to list his powers. (Shaman)

*Incredible:* A second-string hero or villain, this character is someone well divorced from routine public attention. Typically, he seen in action only against other super-characters without much effect on the public. (Kraven)

*Amazing:* One or two people probably know of this character; most don't and wouldn't care if they did. The character is ignored by the press and other agencies. (Morlocks)

*Monstrous:* Who? No one has ever heard of this character, who may be brand new or have little effect on the general public. ("Licorice" Calhoun)

## Concealment

How many of this hero's last few missions have involved no slips or mistakes threatening his identity (e.g., ripped masks, fingerprints embedded in girders, etc.)? Since the status of characters changes constantly in the comics, there are no examples in this section.

*Feeble:* There have been major mistakes in several recent missions, and friends (or enemies) suspect the hero's secret—and

have evidence to back up their ideas.

*Poor:* There has been one recent major slip, or a series of minor slips that could lead a reasonably competent investigator to suspect the truth.

*Typical:* There have been a few minor slips, but nothing would immediately lead an investigator to the truth.

*Good:* One or two very minor slips have been made.

*Excellent:* No slips have been made (applies to most brand-new characters).

## Karma

If a hero has Karma, he tends to be lucky. The fates are on his side, the Force is with him, and coincidences and accidents are resolved in his favor. If he lacks Karma, he won't be saved by lucky accidents, and someone with the CIA or KGB might decide to start looking at those old files on him and analyzing them for clues. If enemies know his secret identity, Karma may bring about a situation that prevents them revealing the information.

## Effects of Secrecy

*Feeble:* The police, intelligence agencies, and other organizations probably know of both of the hero's identities. This information can be learned by any competent researcher. Gossip columnists may be waiting for a slack day to reveal the information if it hasn't already been released, and the truth is definitely known to

S.H.I.E.L.D., the CIA, the FBI, the KGB, and other major intelligence forces.

*Poor:* The connection between the identities could be learned if a major intelligence agency made a real effort, or if super-powers and detective techniques were used. The connection is definitely known to S.H.I.E.L.D. and is probably known to other major agencies.

*Typical:* The identity connection is well-concealed unless a real slip is made. The truth is probably known to S.H.I.E.L.D. but not to other agencies.

*Good:* The identity connection is unlikely to be known to anyone, apart from any confidants that may exist.

*Excellent or better:* The separation of secret and super identities is totally secure, barring disaster.

Judges are advised to avoid publicizing secret identities unnecessarily, even if the PCs are extremely careless. Any factor that might reduce the effect of mistakes should be taken into account. Remember that it is rare for a hero's alias to be revealed in the comics. Unless it is essential to the plot, most super hero RPGs should reflect this philosophy. Ω

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# KEEP THE HEROES FLYING

## A super-hero campaign is built on more than combat

by Carleton Tsui

The MARVEL SUPER HEROES™ game offers role-players the chance to experience the exciting and dramatic adventures featured in Marvel Comics. However, constructing and maintaining a campaign containing super heroes can be difficult despite having recognized characters and a detailed universe. Adventures designed by the Judge must be challenging, with ample opportunities for combat, yet contain continuing plot lines that captivate the participants. The last point is of greatest significance in a game where characters do not gain levels and, even after many adventures, may not be any more powerful than when they started. The scenarios that the Judge devises are the key factor in maintaining a high interest level. This article gives insights and some plot ideas that might help Judges establish campaigns in the mighty Marvel manner. Keep in mind that while references are made to the MARVEL SUPER HEROES game, these points apply to any super-hero game.

### Groups and goals

When assembling a super-hero group, the Judge should have in mind the type of campaign he wishes to develop. Consider the following questions:

1. Who are the heroes involved?
2. What do you know about the heroes' backgrounds?
3. What is the goal of the heroes' team?

These three questions establish the foundation on which you can logically build your scenarios.

The single most important aspect in any campaign is determining who its participants are. Players should role-play characters with whom they are familiar and comfortable. However, players should also be encouraged to use some less-recognized characters at times rather than always using the same old favorites. The best way to handle the selection of heroes is to compose a list of those heroes that you



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know and would like to see in your campaign. Judges are most content in building a campaign with characters they like, just as players are more enthusiastic when playing characters they like. Establish a medium in which both the players and Judge are content.

A crucial factor in the success of the campaign is your knowledge of the player characters' histories. Few know everything about the vast Marvel Universe, but it is a good idea to have at least a general knowledge about the main characters because this background allows you to develop creative subplots and spark new ideas. *The Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe*, recently published by Marvel, and the *Gamer's Handbook of the Marvel Universe* series from TSR, Inc. are invaluable for gaming purposes. Both publications give extensive histories of heroes and villains alike for those not fortunate enough to own every single issue of our favorite comics. The backgrounds of your PCs and nonplayer characters (NPCs) are a rich source of ideas and plots.

From defending the world to just being a nice guy, everyone has a reason for being a hero. Likewise, there should be a reason why super heroes do what they do or why they work together if they are not usually allies. Your campaign need not duplicate the existing Marvel Universe; anything you want to happen can happen. However, if your Marvel characters do not normally associate with each other and your players are Marvel fanatics, some type of explanation should be offered as to why these heroes have teamed up. Here are some heroic team goals commonly found in the Marvel Universe:

1. National or World Defense—The most common unifying force behind super-hero groups involves defense. Protecting the country, the Earth, the galaxy, or the universe is a never-ending struggle. This is the most open-ended goal, and virtually any type of adventure fits it. The Fantastic Four and the Avengers are big followers of this philosophy.

2. Responsibility of Power—Here, the heroes act in the belief that they have a responsibility to use their gifts for the benefit of the public. This approach is often part of the national/world defense ideal, but the heroes may not wish to be involved on such a large scale, working only locally. Daredevil and Spider-Man are the best examples here.

3. Quest—Adventures of this type of group involve reaching specific goals. While the welfare of the public is normally considered, the heroes are not in the business of protecting people. The plans of the X-Men and X-Factor to unite humanity

and mutants are examples of such quests. The most difficult aspect of using this goal in gaming is in devising a quest worthy of long-term play.

4. Revenge—Vigilante campaigns revolve around heroes attempting to avenge some form of harm done to them. The opposing force should be powerful and widespread to allow for maximum potential when designing adventures. The Punisher relies on the revenge theme.

5. Adventuring—Surprise: Adventurers have no purpose! The heroes live from adventure to adventure without specific plans. They may, at times, adopt one of the aforementioned goals, but nothing is permanent. Both Excalibur and She-Hulk seem to exist for the sake of seeking adventure itself.

## The Judge's people

NPCs are essential for an interesting adventure and are among the most important elements in any campaign. Roleplayed well, NPCs provide the human contact that spells the difference between ordinary and exceptional games. Interaction with NPCs adds realism to the game and makes the players aware that the world and its events do not revolve around their PCs.

Through NPCs, Judges can not only have some fun in their own adventures, but can gain a degree of control in any party action. Fans of fantasy role-playing games in which killing is an accepted routine should be reminded of the different situation in the MARVEL SUPER HEROES game, in which NPC heroes can curb the PCs' murderous intentions against criminals by opposing them directly and reminding them of the rule of law. NPCs can also boost the strength of a heroes' team, assist novice players, or provide insight into critical clues with which the players are having difficulty.

When creating regularly used NPCs, have some of them be normal people. Since the world is mainly composed of everyday folks, it stands to reason that the bulk of NPCs will be normal men and women. Get the heroes involved with normal people and show them that the world is not just inhabited by super-powered beings. After all, super heroes are supposed to be a special minority.

However, because normal NPCs are "regular folks," they tend to be overlooked and forgotten in the masses of other super heroes and super villains that the PCs meet. Therefore, normal NPCs must be as memorable as possible. Give them different idiosyncrasies, personalities, situations, abilities, and disabilities. Perhaps one hero's best friend wears outrageous cloth-

ing or likes to sing in public. Peculiar habits are great attention getters, whether it's a new hair style every week or roller skates worn to work. Personalities are harder to pick up on than habits, unless they are obvious or the PCs have known the NPC for some time. Short tempers, radical mood changes, or the ability to laugh at every situation are easily observed. Even a person totally devoid of personality could be interesting! Strange situations really keep the NPC involved with the heroes. An NPC can become a hero's love interest. Maybe the NPC always needs money and finds the heroes generous. Even the landlord who constantly spies on the heroes' private activities can be memorable (if annoying). NPCs with exceptional talents and disabilities will also stick out in the player's mind. Players will remember the skilled doctor who saved their lives or the mathematics professor confined to a wheelchair.

It does not take much to build a memorable NPC. Just one or two memorable traits assigned to an NPC can make him interesting. Consider the Marvel characters Alicia Masters, J. Jonah Jameson, Willy Lumpkin, and Aunt May. Each of these normal characters is memorable because each has a special trait connected to them. Alicia is a blind sculptress, J. Jonah Jameson has a horrible temper, Willy Lumpkin is a kindly old mailman, and Aunt May is a lovable burden to her nephew. Well-developed and well-played NPCs are in the core of any ongoing campaign. In fact, adventures centered on people rather than outside events offer a break from slugfests with villains and the unravelling of global conspiracies.

## Perplexing plots

It is common for adventures and conflicts to center on the PCs. After all, they are the PCs, and if events did not center on them, why bother playing? However, NPCs have lives, too, and sometimes it helps to construct a problem that centers on an NPC instead. Mystery, suspense, and suspicion build when all the information needed to solve a case involving an NPC is not given all at once. Consider the following example:

In a battle with a vampire, an NPC hero (or just a regular NPC) is bitten and, unknown to anyone else, begins a deadly transformation into a vampire. In successive games, clues are given to indicate the onset of vampirism. Since she is an NPC, the Judge can decide when and how to reveal this information to the players. By dropping small clues between other adventures, this subplot can maintain a degree of mystery for several sessions to

come. Suppose the NPC realizes what is happening, but she decides to conceal the fact from the PCs. Perhaps she stubbornly insists that nothing is wrong if confronted with evidence against her. After several games and numerous Psyche FEATs, she finally succumbs to the urge to draw blood—and what better targets than the bothersome PC heroes!

This is much more exciting than just telling a PC hero that he has become a vampire. Not only would the other players hear you say this (passing notes always draws suspicion anyway), but the effect would be less than startling. While it is stressed that the PCs are still number one, keep this NPC option open and tease players with bits and pieces of upcoming events. Plots like these are another reason why a good set of NPCs is valuable.

What follows is a number of events that can be used as plots or subplots. Some are easily incorporated into most campaigns, while others require some brainstorming on the Judge's part. All have been successfully used by this author, and the ideas expressed about each topic may serve as inspiration.

**Romance:** For those who enjoy role-playing, this field provides splendid opportunities for interaction. It is an entertaining and challenging topic to handle, but it requires maturity from the Judge and players for full effect.

If romance is an angle that you wish to include in your campaign, examine the backgrounds of the heroes who might be its objects. If a hero is a known Marvel character, he might already be romantically involved with another person or even married. But what if the character is not noted as having any romantic companions? The Judge can perform the match-making with an NPC or (with another player's consent) another PC hero, although in the latter case this will usually happen on its own. In the case of establishing an NPC partner, the Judge should consider the hero's popularity, personality, physical appearance, and actions. Most normal people would jump at the chance to be involved with a super hero, but some heroes might have a different view ("I don't need you! I'm the Phoenix!").

NPCs would be attracted to PC heroes for numerous reasons: short-term infatuation, the lure of fame (even to be shown in the tabloids), a set-up by the hero's arch-enemy (with the NPC as the bait), or even true love. In any event, keep the NPC active and involved in the PC's life just as if it were a real relationship. If the player refuses the NPC's advances, the NPC could leave, get angry, or keep trying to win the PC's affections. The lover may even go to

great extents to harm or attract the PC, depending on how deep the feelings run.

As long as the lover maintains a relationship with a hero, watch the hero's actions toward that person carefully. PCs are expected to spend time with their loved ones and remember things like birthdays and Christmas. Heroes who are married and have children have even more to handle. Neglected commitments and lost affection may result in arguments, a break-up, or even a divorce. Karma can be gained or lost easily when dealing with personal relationships. This plot can become very complex, but it can be highly rewarding and provide great enjoyment.

**Death:** Having just touched on what may be the happiest times for the hero, we now focus on a very dismal fact of life: death. In every role-playing game there exists the possibility of a PC dying. Sooner or later it catches up to all heroes [see "Nobody Lasts Forever," in DRAGON® issue #150]. In the MARVEL SUPER HEROES game, though, it seems that death is generally not a problem. With vast supplies of Karma and high Endurances, heroes can stave off death almost indefinitely. Some

heroes are even immortal and cannot die! Due to enhancements in the Advanced game set, PCs are even allowed a FEAT roll against Kill shots. A little Karma on this roll virtually guarantees safety.

The Marvel game is a wonderful game of action and astounding feats against seemingly unbeatable odds. However, without the threat of death, players receive the impression that the Judge will always save their PCs, and the challenge of combat fades. Death provides a sharp sense of excitement that may otherwise be forgotten after many adventures.

To remedy this situation, incorporate the rule that a Kill shot means an instant loss of all Health points (such as in the original MARVEL SUPER HEROES set) and the hero begins losing Endurance ranks. All methods of stopping or slowing Endurance losses are applicable. Do not allow an Endurance FEAT vs. the kill shot! Since few heroes can afford 50 Karma points per round to stabilize their Endurances or 200 Karma points for new Endurance FEATs, caution in combat and having a friends aid are still the best solutions.

On occasion, you may wish to include



the death of an NPC in the campaign. It should be someone whom the heroes have known and perhaps liked or loved; the NPC might even have been a fellow hero. It might even happen that a PC hero is slain, though this should not be purposefully planned for by the Judge. The death of a comrade in a tightly bound group such as those in the comics is usually met with considerable grief, offering extensive opportunities for role-playing. It is a shame that most Judges view death as nothing more than a chance to roll up new characters. Handled tastefully with players who enjoy role-playing with sentimental details, this can be a powerful addition to the campaign.

**Battling other heroes:** The confrontation between two known groups of heroes is a theme that has been frequently used in comics. The only thing that exceeds a phenomenal hero-versus-villain battle is a hero-versus-hero confrontation. Its very nature is fascinating. What would prompt acknowledged super heroes (and good friends, in most cases) to resort to using violence against each other?

This plot is difficult to construct. Again, background material on the heroes involved provides hints for constructing such battles. A logical explanation for the cause of such a fight is essential, as your players might demand to know why the heroes are fighting their allies! Perhaps the most frequently employed rationale here is mind control. Villains with mind-control powers are fairly common. They take great pleasure in having super heroes slug it out with one another, perhaps eliminating some of them. The advantage of mind control is that the controlled heroes are the real thing, not robots made up like the heroes, and the free-willed heroes are at a disadvantage in stopping their attackers without severely injuring them. Mind control is a viable, if somewhat unimaginative, solution.

Another rationale for hero-versus-hero battles is the use of robot duplicates or shape-changing imitators. These scoundrels usually imitate other beings only for combat purposes and for the confusion generated when they, as "good guys," attack the heroes. Some of the more deviant imitators might infiltrate the team itself to steal secrets, defeat the headquarters' security, break up the team by causing personal problems, or spy on their actions. But only the finest imitators will not be caught off guard when confronted by bits of information only known to personal friends of the imitated-being.

The ideal hero-versus-hero battle is a genuine one, an unavoidable situation in which one team resorts to violence to solve a problem with another team. Laying out the plot and motivations involved takes a lot of work. For example, the PCs in the role of X-Factor might end up fighting the X-Men (NPCs controlled by, the Judge) because each believes they are doing the

right thing for a certain mutant girl that each team is trying to rescue. X-Factor believes the girl should be trained to use her powers but then returned to society, while the X-Men want to train her as a potential adventurer. Suppose X-Factor decides that the girl is too young to face the dangers of heroism, while the X-Men believes that she would be perfectly safe. Neither side will budge, and when the joint rescue operation is completed, the real action begins.

In this example, conflict results from opposing goals. Fights resulting from clashing morals or plans at cross purposes are some of the most fascinating and sensational of all battles. The scenario is also thought provoking. Are the heroes doing the right thing? Perhaps their rivals are correct!

**Financial disasters:** This plot works best with heroes who have Excellent or better Resources or are involved in a business. A plot such as this does not have the same effect when resources are Poor to begin with. As the heading suggests, this plot involves a major loss of money. This could come about for several reasons, including lawsuits, blackmail, trickery, bad investments, debt, gambling, addiction to alcohol or drugs, competition by rival companies, or plain old theft.

Loss of money on a grand scale can be quite devastating. Tony Stark was an excellent example here, having suffered a continuing chain of problems arising from a financial disaster. He was cheated out of his multimillion-dollar company and contracts. As a result, he lost almost all his armor, which led to his drinking problem. It forced him out of the hero business and cost him the respect of many people.

Lawsuits and rival companies can be anything from annoying to downright dangerous. The former can potentially drain millions of dollars and are particularly useful against property-negligent heroes. And one should be especially careful when rivalling big businesses; unscrupulous businessmen have a habit of sending but hired muscle to see that the competition is crippled or eliminated completely. Super villains may become involved after normal methods of pushing out the heroes have failed. Friends and family could be kidnapped, held for ransom, or killed to ensure the bankruptcy of the PCs' company. PCs may also resort to violence or threats, but if they're caught in the act, they may be blackmailed into submission in return for not handing over incriminating evidence to the law or pressing charges. The corporations of the comic-book world are filled with corruption. Make use of them.

Addiction to chemical substances or to gambling can also put the hero in serious debt. Any supplier to an addicted hero is bound to have some tough muscle in his own organization which would be readily used against the hero, should he not be

able to come up with the money. It may be difficult to get a player to have his hero become addicted to drugs or abuse alcohol, for very obvious reasons. However, perhaps an NPC friend of a PC hero has such a problem, and steals from the hero or calls on the hero when in trouble.

If you feel that chemical addictions are distasteful to you or to your players, you can utilize less graphic but still expensive habits. A hero might be a rabid computer-game freak, aggressive art collector, or compulsive shopper. Tony Stark used to buy sports cars at the rate of about one per week.

The bottom line is that everyone needs money, even super heroes. A financial disaster should never occur more than once per campaign, as it takes considerable time for heroes to recuperate from it. After plunging into the depths of poverty, give the PCs a break. Any plot can be overused.

**Lifesavers:** In this scenario, the team is involved in a quest to find some type of antidote or some much-needed information. The success of this plot depends on the originality of the problem and solution.

Generally, the plot runs something like this: A member of the team becomes severely ill, irradiated, transformed, comatose, etc. The PCs must detect, analyze, and formulate a solution to the problem. Most of the time the solution requires the building of a special apparatus or the obtaining of a rare herb, medicine, radioactive material, chemical, or magical talisman. It may be that the device to be constructed is simply extremely expensive. A classic example of the life-saving plot is the Fantastic Four's journey into the Negative Zone to steal the cosmic control rod from Annihilus. The rod's power was then used to save the life of the Invisible Girl, just before she gave birth to her son.

Certainly not all life-saving plots are on such a cosmic level, and a few twists to the standard plot can give it a new perspective. Suppose that in order to save the hero's life, another hero must give up his. But who would do it? Another team member? A fanatical fan of the hero? Someone who loves him? Maybe the hero will opt not to be saved, knowing that he has led a full life and wishing others to do the same. If a PC is the one who is dying, make sure that the player understands that such a voluntary death is final; otherwise the significance and impact of the problem is weakened.

Another problem that might appear concerns the side effects of the cure. Suppose that a cure robs the hero of his powers in part or in whole? Or maybe the cure requires the powers of another hero—but after the cure is applied, the donating hero loses his powers! What if the donating hero was not told of this

*Continued on page 79*



consequence beforehand? What if the cure requires the aid of a super villain? No doubt in the former case there would be some type of confrontation between friends of the donating hero and the recipient (a darn good reason for a hero-versus-hero battle). In the latter case, some interesting propositions would have to be made to get a super villain to aid a foe, especially if a sworn arch-enemy must be called upon.

However, the healing process might have beneficial side effects, too. Some of the people involved in the process might acquire new powers or have their original powers enhanced. The healer and the patient might, in some processes, be merged into one being, with both consciousnesses intact. Future work may have to be done if such a merging proves dangerous or aggravating. As you can see, the aftermath can be just as interesting (if not more so) as the initial problem.

**Loss of powers:** What is it that separates a super hero from everyone else? His powers, of course. The previous scenario has already illustrated that powers can be lost. This plot often fits well with the life-saving line, as nothing inspires a hero to find a cure faster than when his own powers are on the line.

What happens to the hero once he loses his powers? The answer can only be supplied by the PC and depends on whether the powers can ever be regained. In most cases, the PC is retired and a new hero is generated if the power loss is permanent. Playing a character with no powers on a team that must constantly defend the safety of the planet is tough, to say the least. Should the hero remain true to his cause despite his handicap, there may be no need to quit. Permanently depowered characters can concentrate on gaining additional talents and raising their ability scores. Storm, of the X-Men, is such an example. When she realized that she would never command the elements again, she trained hard and in the long run even became the X-Men's leader. Judges who encounter a player so dedicated to his hero that he will play him even without powers should encourage his actions. Everyone loves a good comeback story. Perhaps the new and improved hero will be even better, having dealt with his "disability," and will triumph in the end.

The complete opposite of this scenario would be the massive gaining of power. Here, the hero finds his powers increasing to unimaginable levels. Soon, however, it could become an uncontrollable curse as the slightest release of energy might devastate vast areas of land or threaten to consume the hero. Or the power could taint the PC's righteousness, creating a "Dark Phoenix" effect. Strict limitations should be placed on the hero in order to preserve game balance should the Judge opt for a permanent increase of power to godlike levels.

The most important aspect about dealing with the loss of power is to treat it as a serious event. The effects can be temporary, but the players do not have to know that! Players tend to scoff and not be concerned if they can be sure that their heroes' precious powers will return to them. Used sparingly and effectively, the loss of powers can be one of the most challenging adventures for the players.

**Group break-ups:** Another good role-playing plot is the dissolution of the heroes' team. Incidents that could split up a heroes' team are many. Background material may indicate some sort of conflict between members that could be an underlying cause. Usually, a group breakdown is the result of personal conflicts (although the players themselves might split up for unrelated reasons, forcing changes in hero-group rosters).

A change of goals and outlook on life by one of the members could cause him to now oppose the goals or general alignment of the team. A serious traumatic experience, such as the slaying of a fellow member or friend, could psychologically injure a heroic character to the point of resignation. This hero may find her performance dropping because of grief or the fear of death, and other team members may soon request that she at least take a vacation.

It could be that a lover persuades the hero to quit because the lover cannot tolerate knowing that the hero lives in constant danger. If the hero refuses, the lover may leave, keep pleading, or even hire villains to beat up the hero to prove the point! Two members of the team may decide to get married, and one or both of them may not wish to pursue the adventuring life any further.

Villains desire nothing more than to see the good guys out of business. Enemies may seek to destroy the trust and companionship bonding the team. This can be attempted by mental or emotional control. Characters who are controlled may be consumed with fear, hate, doubt, or jealousy, and teammates may become approved by the controlled character's actions. Villains may frame heroes for staged crimes, especially the killing of

innocents or massive destruction. The team may then be wanted by the law and forced to disband, abandoning any public headquarters until the heroes can be cleared. Instead of breaking up, the group might go underground.

A situation in which only one or two members leave would provide a smooth entry for any new heroes that the Judge wishes to join the team. Just make sure that an explanation for disbanding a team or losing team members is reasonable. A super hero would not just give up after one or two failures, but only if some major disaster in his life caused him to believe that the group or world would be better off without him.

## Aftermath

This article has highlighted some of the more popular plots found in comic books, but it has by no means even scratched the surface of the infinite variety of scenarios available. These plots have generally avoided combat, as it takes more than just a good fight to make a campaign; it is assumed that all Judges can design a decent combat situation.

Few players might consider having their heroes quit or get romantically involved, except for the most skilled role-players. Because your average player, especially a novice, will not involve himself in such situations, it is advisable to keep a cast of NPCs to help out. NPCs are extremely useful in promoting player initiative. Encourage players to take their own course of action, too, instead of merely waiting for the latest world domination plan to crop up.

Remember, with great power comes great responsibility, and no one has more power or responsibility than the game master.



# 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.

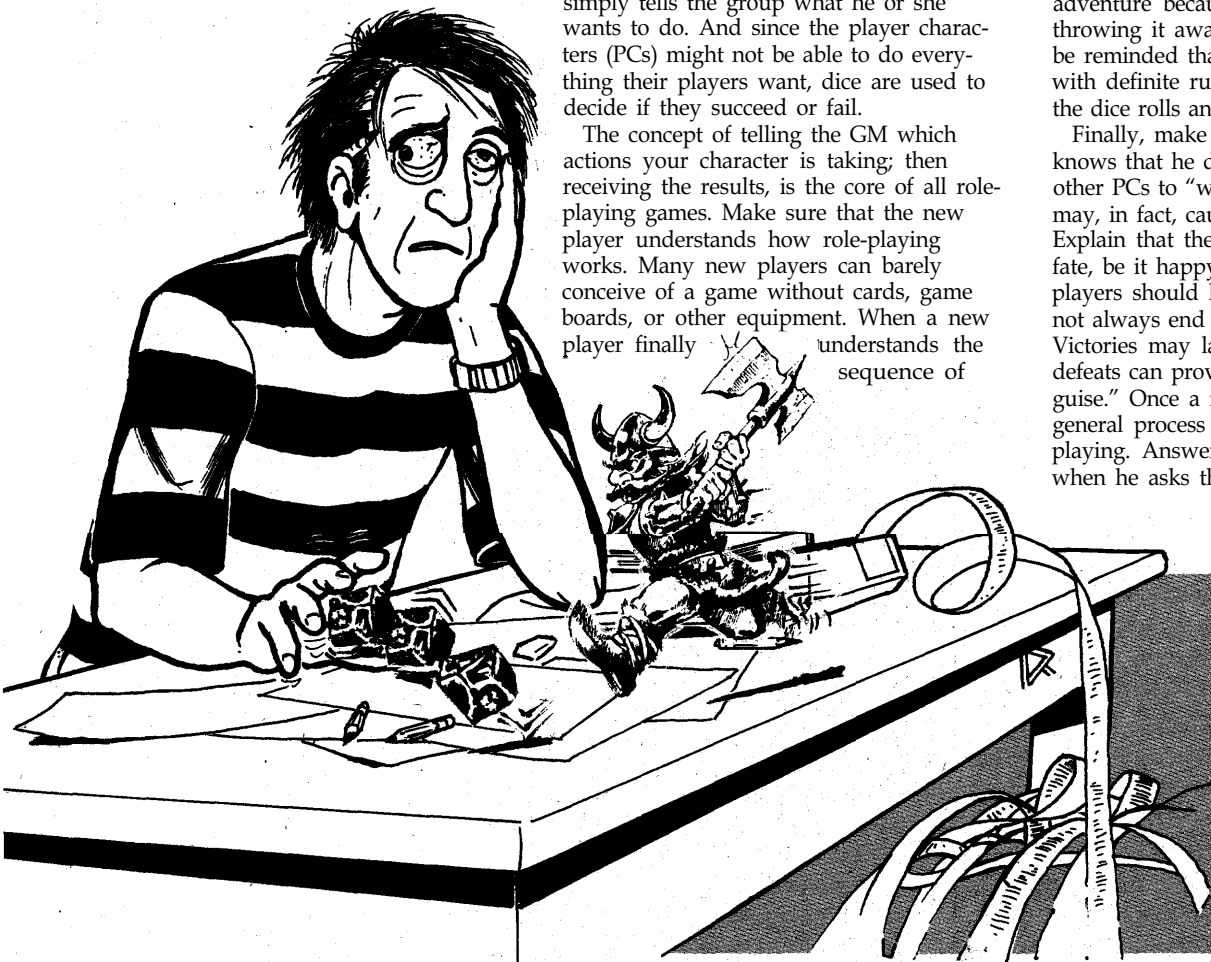
The concept of telling the GM which actions your character is taking; then receiving the results, is the core of all role-playing games. Make sure that the new player understands how role-playing works. Many new players can barely conceive of a game without cards, game boards, or other equipment. When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

*Continued on page 70*



Artwork by Roger Raupp

## The Rules

Continued from page 36

### 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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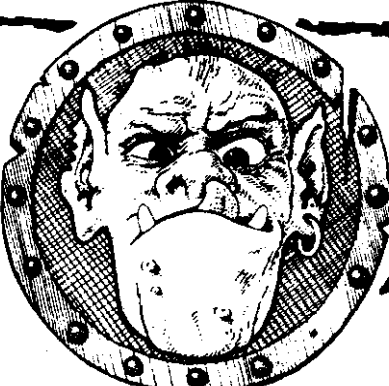
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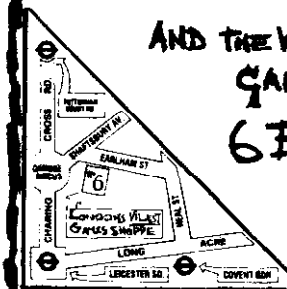


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Continued on page 100

## The Rules

Continued from page 70

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 chief-tain, 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.

Ω

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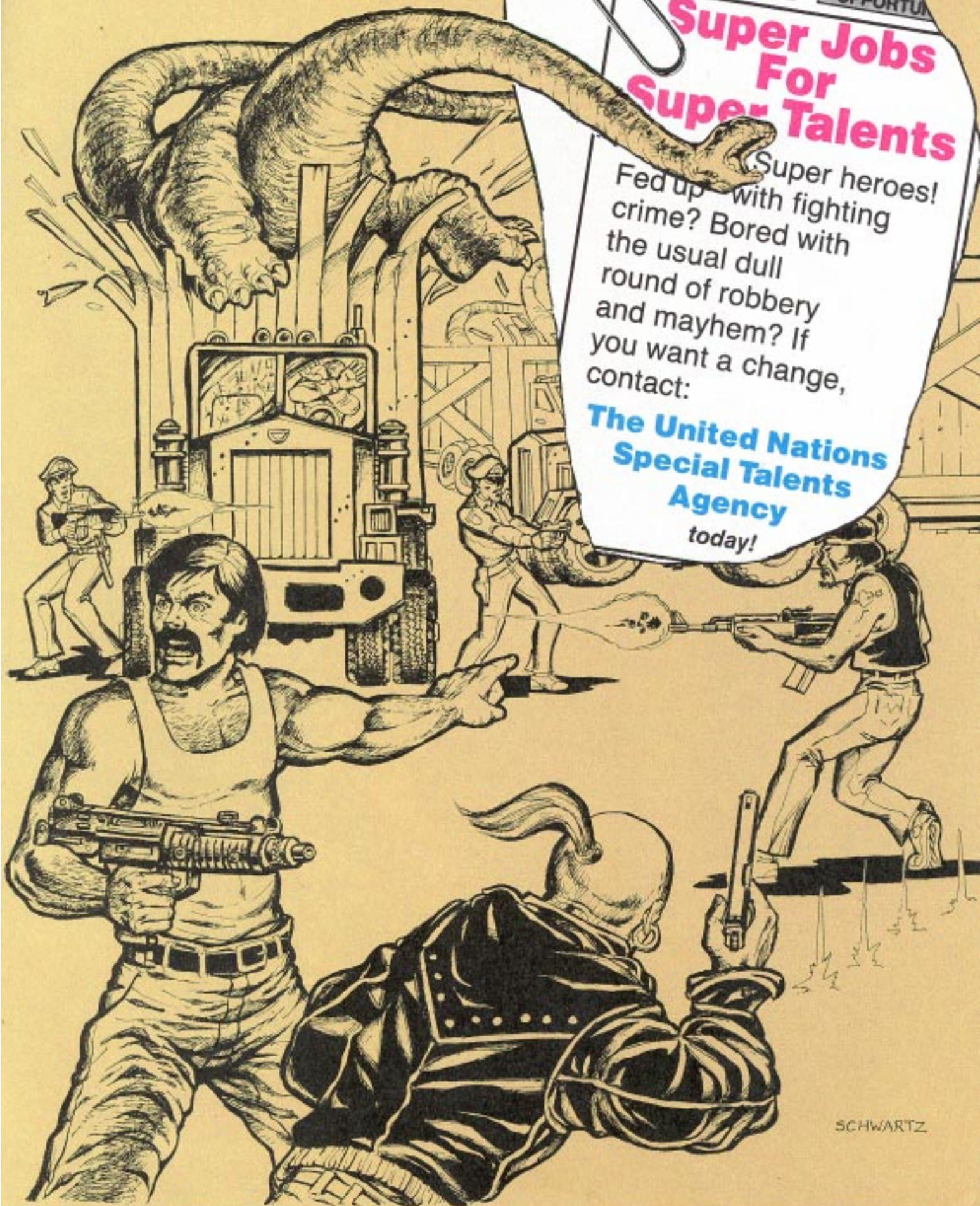
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# Super Jobs For Super Talents

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Super-hero RPGs often assume that superpowered individuals have been active for some time, and that governments have developed responses to the most common extraordinary situations. These games also seem to assume that superpowers are fairly common; there certainly seems to be no shortage of super villains and NPC heroes.

Most such games have backgrounds in which super heroes are publicly accepted or tolerated, and they include security and intelligence agencies equipped to handle normal criminal organizations and weak super villains, to obtain super-hero help when needed, and to run special prisons for super villains. Some games add special legal responses to superpowers. For example, Hero Games' CHAMPIONS\* and Chaosium's SUPERWORLD\* games include probation schemes for super villains in which the criminals' secret identity is published and a year or more must be devoted to community service. However, in most games, an interest in law enforcement often seems to be the only common ground between society and super heroes.

The comics usually ignore military and intelligence roles for super heroes. In role-playing terms, it's logical to assume that international treaties prevent the use of such heroes outside a full-scale war; most governments would probably see someone like DC Comics' Superman as a greater threat than nuclear weapons, and hero control would be part of any SALT treaty (See *The Watchmen* from DC Comics for more on the effects of having super heroes in a nuclear age).

Leaving careers in crime, espionage, and war aside, there are many unusual jobs for those with superpowers. In the past, comics have shown many super heroes putting their talents to spectacular use; Superman, in particular, seems to spend much of his time blowing out forest fires, diverting floods, and saving towns from rock slides and other disasters. Other heroes are scientists, engineers, or philanthropists. Who can forget Doc Savage's charity medical work, or the achievements of the Wayne Foundation in DC Comics' Batman stories?

It seems logical that many public and private organizations would want to take advantage of such new opportunities. This

article describes such an organization, with three generic scenario outlines: the United Nations Special Talents Agency (UNSTA). This organization (which can be altered to become national, worldwide, or universe spanning, depending on the scope of your campaign) was founded shortly after the first super heroes appeared. It is a nonprofit group funded by national governments, charities, and large corporations, and it draws on their resources for information and ideas. UNSTA exists to find talents to fit unusual problems, recruiting personnel for jobs that will benefit mankind. With few exceptions, these jobs are unpaid, requiring minor diversions of heroes' time or energy. There are four main arms of UNSTA; Investigation (the talent spotters), Administration, the Ethical Committee, and Recruitment.

Talent spotters gather data on super heroes and villains, from the press and other sources, and maintain a computer database cross-referenced by powers, names, nations, etc. This arm also records potential uses for superpowers and does most of the work of matching powers to problems. The database could possibly be used to trace the secret identities of heroes by correlating times and locations of their appearances or other details. But a great deal of effort is devoted to eliminating such information from the reports—at least, that's what the agency claims is done. Whether this is true may be a problem for your heroes to investigate.

Administration handles funding, legal problems, visas, transport arrangements, advertising, and other mundane details. An organization as large as UNSTA couldn't possibly function without an efficient office staff, and this arm is essential, though its members rarely come into contact with heroes.

The Ethical Committee ensures that all the jobs found for super heroes are worthwhile. Sometimes this arm will turn down applications for help on the grounds that a project will be ecologically damaging, profitable for a particular company or government at the expense of others, or have other detrimental effects. Rejected applicants often resort to dubious means of enlisting superpowered support.

The Recruitment arm tries to persuade

superpowered individuals to participate in UNSTA projects. This is usually easy, as most super heroes will gladly spend a few days on flood relief or help to transport a heart patient from Australia to Belgium. However, many of the most unusual powers belong to villains, who often demand an exorbitant fee, amnesty, or some other reward for participation. Sometimes it's also necessary to negotiate with governments to obtain permission for super heroes to leave their territories, or with penal authorities to obtain parole for super villains.

These aspects of the agency's operation can easily lead to interesting and unusual adventures. For example, suppose the World Wildlife Fund wants to study Mongolian gerbils in their natural habitat, so UNSTA recruits several super heroes to help the project: using X-ray vision and sonar to guide fiberoptic probes down the gerbils' burrows, reading the gerbils' minds to determine their goals and motivations, etc. The main problems are political and involve persuading the Mongolians, Soviets, and Chinese to allow Western super heroes to visit their territory. It's likely that lots of intrigue will surround this project. Western intelligence organizations may see a chance to put an agent onto the super-hero team, while Eastern-bloc agencies may try to recruit the Western agents as spies, learn their secret identities, etc. It's an unusual chance for Eastern and Western super heroes to meet without violence, and it could pave the way for some interesting adventures.

Another example: Mr Frosty, a convicted super villain with cryogenic powers, is asked to participate in experiments on medical freezing and suspended animation. He demands \$100,000 and a review of his sentence. UNSTA raises the money (held in trust for his release) and tries to persuade the parole board to review his case. The board refuses, so UNSTA calls in well-known super heroes to lobby for a sentence review and, ultimately, to supervise the experiments and make sure that there are no embarrassing incidents.

The scenarios that follow assume that UNSTA has been active for some time and is known to all heroes. Player-character heroes shouldn't be very powerful; beginning characters with limited experience are preferred.

**Scenario 1: Operation Krait** (for 2-4 heroes)

**Players' information:** The Republic of Quitana is a modern African state allied to the West. Recently this government captured Krait, a super villain with remarkable powers of poison generation and nullification. UNSTA needs such powers for medical research and development, and it wishes to interview Krait and establish his attitudes to such work. The Quitanese government has flatly refused access, saying that Krait's crimes are too serious to make parole possible. This seems odd because Krait always specialized in crimes against property, using his venom for short-term paralysis or knock-out effects. UNSTA wants the PCs to join its team in Quitana and use their talents and influence to resolve the situation.

**Referee's information:** Strict human-rights treaties govern the imprisonment of super villains. It is accepted that some villains must be restrained by temporary nullification of their powers, or by the reduction of intelligence and strength, but these changes must be reversible when the prisoner is released. Also, villains cannot have their characteristics reduced below human norms by their restraints.

The Quitanese government has been violating this rule, using a combination of drugs, surgery, and radiation treatment to permanently reduce the IQ of superpowered prisoners and to prevent them from using their powers effectively. Krait has been treated twice, and his mental faculties are now slightly below the human norm. Another treatment will cause irreversible brain damage. The Quitanese police have been bugging the local UNSTA offices for some time, and the police know that the heroes are in Quitana to investigate the situation. On arrival, the heroes are invited to a reception at the Presidential palace. During the reception, government agents attempt to fake Krait's escape and murder him, in circumstances suggesting that he attempted to kill his warders. Exact details of this scenario are left to the referee, who should remember the following points:

1. The prison was built for normal humans, and only a small section has been upgraded to hold super villains.
2. Krait is one of three superpowered prisoners; the others are already irreversibly brain damaged. All retain their powers but are too stupid to use them effectively.
3. The Quitanese government wishes to remain friendly to the West and attempts to avoid any embarrassing incidents. The plot to kill Krait is a desperate measure intended to stop a full investigation into the Quitanese penal system.
4. UNSTA wishes to stay-on good terms with the Quitanese government.
5. The heroes cannot determine Krait's attitudes before beginning their investigation. If rescued, he pretends to be cooperative but seizes the first chance to escape

and continue his life of crime.

**Scenario 2: Heavy Rescue** (for 4-8 heroes)

**Players' information:** UNSTA often tries to persuade super heroes to participate in training schemes that will help them deal with the emergencies they encounter. Such courses include first aid, firefighting, basic criminal law, and heavy rescue—the latter being techniques for dealing with large-scale civilian disasters. This is a popular subject, since many heroes are at home with crimefighting but aren't sure how to tackle a train crash, a nuclear-waste spillage, or a landslide. The course takes a week and is given in a big city with a wide variety of industrial sites (e.g., Detroit for American campaigns, Birmingham for British campaigns).

The heroes have managed to arrange a week away from other obligations, such as activities in secret and public identities, and find the course interesting but a little daunting. After four days of theory and demonstrations, the instructor feels that the group is ready to tackle a practical exercise. He is briefing the heroes about a simulated rail crash when the telephone rings.

**Referees information:** Don't run this episode with telepaths or other super heroes who can easily detect a lie. The telephone call comes from the schools office and is designed to trick characters with superhearing or other special senses. No train crash has been arranged. Instead, the team will be told that a real emergency has developed: An old warehouse has collapsed on top of a demolition crane. The driver is trapped inside the crane cab, and there is reason to believe that gas mains have been fractured. The normal heavy rescue teams are on the other side of the city, setting up the simulated train crash, and the heroes may be the only hope of rescuing the driver before the gas explodes. The referee must prepare a floor plan of a demolished building, using the guidelines herein, scaling the size of the problem to the number of super heroes and the strength of their powers.

Of course, the "real" disaster is another simulation. The crane driver is a realistic dummy, built by a medical plastics company, and is apparently trapped in the cab with severe injuries. Several building workers pretending to remove debris are actually instructors who have not met the team before, aided by disguised super heroes (veterans of the course) who make sure that no one is really injured. There is a strong smell of gas, but this is really inert nitrogen mixed with a smelly chemical, a harmless compound added to real gas supplies to ensure that leaks are easily detected. The collapsed building is carefully balanced to look dangerous, but the wreckage is supported by several strong girders that have "luckily" remained welded together. With care, it's possible to tunnel through the lower part of the

wreckage without disturbing the equilibrium of the pile. Have your players make frequent rolls against dexterity (or whatever characteristic is appropriate) as they move the wreckage, giving bonuses if the players work as a team. If these rolls fail, bits of rubble move slightly, there are ominous groaning noises, and dust cascades into everyone's hair.

The rubble can also be removed from above, but removing more than a ton from any one area without balancing the weight or shoring the pile will also make the wreckage shift.

If anyone tries a short cut, like pulling the debris off the crane without shoring the lower sections, the wreckage will pass a critical balance point and one of the girders will shift to pin the "driver" to his seat with a crushed chest. Concealed remote-controlled explosive charges can make the crane catch fire (harmlessly) or cause parts of the building to collapse. The dummy is fitted with a chemically powered synthetic heart and other internal organs, and it realistically bleeds or "dies" if injured by the rescue attempts. The "victim" appears to be unconscious throughout the rescue.

Fire engines and ambulances will arrive at the same time as the heroes but won't have heavy rescue equipment. Heavy units (equipped with winches, chainsaws, jacks, and drills) appear five minutes after the heroes and conduct a flawless rescue if the team hasn't already saved the driver. The heavy units helped set up the "disaster" and know exactly how the wreckage is balanced and booby-trapped.

Players should be made to feel that this is a real emergency, and it should be followed through until the "driver" is rescued or dead. Obviously, the referee should ensure that none of the super heroes' special powers permit an easy rescue; for example, a character with desolidification powers might want to walk through the wreckage, materialize, pick up the driver, and desolidify to walk out again. The referee should make this impossible by allowing no room for the character to materialize, but should encourage the use of such powers in reconnaissance and planning.

After this incident, the referee (as the course's instructor) should hold a careful inquest on the rescue attempt, pointing out the heroes' mistakes and any particularly good moves. He will also ask the team to keep silent about this aspect of the course. There are no further incidents in the remaining days of the course, just lots of hard work. Skills or experience points should be awarded for success in the rescue only, although in reality it is only a small part of the course. Referees might also use experience of this course as a modifier to the success of future rescue missions.

As an optional epilogue to this scenario, the referee could ask the players to design a fake incident for the next class and run



it with another group of players. The school can supply vehicles, dummies, and up to \$25,000 for expenses and equipment, and it will arrange for the cooperation of emergency services. If no more players are available, the referee can still use the new plan, with the players supervising the site while a group of NPC heroes run through the test. The referee can ensure that the new heroes are less competent than the player characters and run into dangerous problems.

### **Scenario 3: Breakout** (for 4-8 heroes)

**Players' information:** For several years, scientists at the London Zoo, aided by interested super heroes, have been developing techniques to recreate extinct animals by implanting fossil DNA extracted from bones and other remnants into the reproductive cells of related species. The dodos, sabre-tooth tigers, and mammoths that now grace many zoos were early successes. The most ambitious effort has been an attempt to breed dinosaurs using ostrich and alligator eggs seeded with reconstructed DNA.

Eighteen months ago, the scientists achieved their first success, hatching four diplodocus dinosaurs (three females and one male) from ostrich eggs. They are now slightly smaller than adult elephants. This spectacular success has almost doubled admissions at the zoo, and the sauropods are a great favorite with the crowds. The scientists expect the dinosaurs to continue to grow for many years, but their current accommodation (the elephant house) is already becoming cramped. It's obvious that the dinosaurs must soon be moved to a larger site, a specially prepared paddock and lake at Whipsnade Zoo, a few miles outside London. UNSTA arranged most of the super-hero cooperation on this project, and it has asked the team to accompany the convoy and ensure that no harm comes to the dinosaurs.

**Referee's information:** The convoy consists of four low-loader trucks, each carrying a 10-meter-long crate containing a dinosaur. All are accompanied by a police escort (two cars and four motorcycles), a repair truck, a crane, and two vets in one pick-up truck. The convoy will leave London Zoo at 5 A.M. to avoid London's heavy morning traffic, taking main roads to Whipsnade Zoo. The diplodoci are herbivorous dinosaurs with long necks and tails, living on a diet of hay, conifer branches, and vitamins. Each is eight meters long and weighs three tons. These dinosaurs are extremely strong, moderately fast, and can attack by biting, by trampling with their forefeet, or by striking with their whiplike tails (the referee should generate appropriate statistics). They attack only if they are frightened, and they usually run from anything that scares them. The experiments that produced these dinosaurs have cost hundreds of man-years, the work of dozens of super heroes, and millions of pounds sterling. At least a third of

this expenditure will be required again if the dinosaurs do not survive the transfer.

Despite their size, the dinosaurs do have their problems. Their lungs will fill with fluid if they are tranquilized, they are horribly stupid, and they will almost certainly suffer gross internal damage if their weight is concentrated on any one part of their bodies (e.g., if a super hero picks up a dinosaur and tries to carry it). They are very nervous and will panic if they hear loud noises, see or smell fire, or smell any large carnivore. Excessive vibration during the move will also panic them, so the low-loaders must crawl along at 10-15 MPH.

Unfortunately, extremist members of a fundamentalist religious organization have decided that these experiments threaten the central tenet of their faith—the belief that the universe was created on the 18th of July 1924, at 3:15 P.M. (GMT). Their religion teaches that all evidence of prior existence was created to test the strength of their faith. Obviously, the recreation of dinosaurs that roamed the earth millions of years ago is the ultimate challenge to their devotion. To prove the strength of their faith, they must destroy the blasphemous reptiles!

These fanatics have stolen two rocket launchers, many grenades, and several machine pistols. They intend to make two attacks on the convoy. One group will make its attack in London, and the other group will strike in the country. To preserve security, the two groups have made their plans separately, and members of one group don't know exactly when or where the others will attack. There should be at least two terrorists per hero in each group.

The move hasn't been kept secret, and the route used by the convoy is predictable. Despite the early hour, the press and hundreds of dinosaur lovers are waiting on the roads near the zoo, hoping to get a glimpse of the monsters.

The first attack will be a relatively crude effort, staged very near the zoo. The terrorists simply block the road with a car, then fire a rocket at the leading truck, blowing up its engine. The remaining terrorists close in and spray the crates with bullets. The explosion and shots panic the dinosaurs, which stamp and thrash about in their crates. Each diplodocus has a cumulative 10% chance of breaking out in each combat round that the fight continues. If the dinosaurs escape, they run through the crowds, trampling innocent bystanders and smashing cars and shop windows as they move and thrash their tails. They are too big to be seriously injured by small-caliber machine-pistol bullets, but they will naturally be very frightened.

The second attack is more sophisticated. The terrorists have stolen a tanker truck that overtakes the convoy halfway between the zoos. As it passes, the driver pulls a cord and a grenade attached to the truck's rear valves explodes. The driver

leaps clear and sprints for safety as burning petrol floods the road along the length of the convoy. The remaining terrorists are in another van behind the convoy and will attack immediately after the tanker explodes. The referee should ensure that at least two of the dinosaurs escape; they are at risk from passing cars and trucks, overhead power cables, and nearby railway lines.

Provided the heroes can handle these attacks, then calm and recage the dinosaurs, the rest of the run to Whipsnade is uneventful. On arrival at Whipsnade, the dinosaurs panic again as the crates pass the crocodile pool. Luckily, their enclosure is at the other end of the zoo, and they won't normally be able to smell the reptiles. The adventure ends as the diplodoci shyly emerge into their new enclosure, tentatively nibbling bushes and conifers as they settle down in the comparative calm of the country. It's possible that the dinosaurs might escape when they are bigger; a fully grown diplodocus is approximately 30 meters long and weighs 11 tons, but will still be prone to panic.

A number of sequels to this adventure are possible. A super villain could use the same technology to breed carnivorous dinosaurs and use them in crimes. Time-traveling heroes might help the project by bringing back specimens from the past, only to stumble into situations that could alter history. As the zoos and parks of the world fill with dinosaurs, more incidents will probably occur involving more challenging species and more determined efforts by extremists to slay them.

### **Notes and sources**

The UNSTA is fictional, but the World Wildlife Fund is real and deserving of support. Games consulted for this article included TSR's MARVEL SUPER HEROES™, Mayfair's DC HEROES\*, GW's GOLDEN HEROES\*, Hero Games' CHAMPIONS\*, Chaosium's SUPERWORLD\*, FGU's VILAINS & VIGILANTES\*, and SUPER SQUADRON\* games. There are no obvious compatibility problems with any of these games. Further sources include: *A Talent for the Invisible and Odd Job Inc.*, by Ron Goulart; *Rescue Mission and A Fall of Moondust*, by Arthur C. Clarke; the Sector General series by James H. White; and *The Thunderbirds* TV series, by Gerry & Sylvia Anderson. Ω

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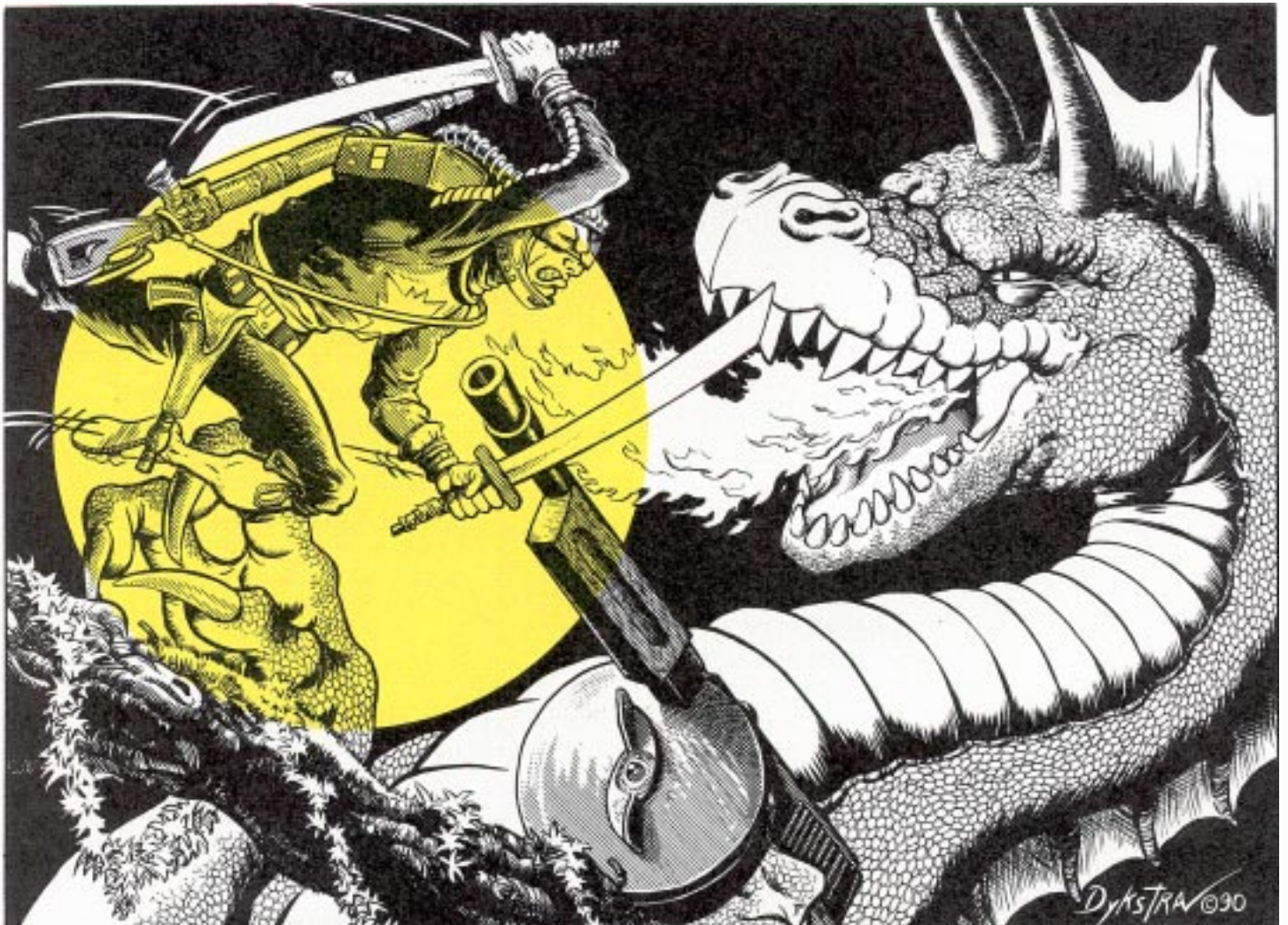
# Square Pegs and Round Holes



Dropping commercial adventures into existing campaigns

by Jerold M. Stratton

Artwork by Terry Dykstra



Many game masters are of the opinion that using prepackaged, commercial adventures in their carefully constructed campaigns is similar to forcing a square peg into a round hole. I believe that well-constructed campaigns are the most suitable for commercial adventures and that commercial adventures can enhance a campaign and aid the game master. If a world is created with care, the designer can more easily make decisions about integrating adventures into the world. Also, there is nothing to restrict game masters to using only adventures written for one game system; adventures from other game systems are also useful. There are two major reasons for using commercial adventures. The most obvious is that a large amount of adventure material can be gained with only a small amount of work. The second is that it allows the game master to run adventures in styles he does not feel comfortable creating himself.

## How to get started

First, find an adventure that you would like to run. Chances are you have already come across adventures in the local game store and thought "This would be good if it weren't for . . ." If the basic premise of the adventure is something you like, the adventure can probably be integrated into your campaign. There are three steps to fitting an adventure to a world:

1. *Read the adventure:* Make sure you understand what is happening and why it is happening. Why do the antagonists act the way they do? Why are the items where they are? Why are the events taking place when they do? The author did not write this adventure with your world's player characters in mind; your players may do things the author did not expect, and you must be prepared to wing it within the module's context.

2. *Find what you like:* Determine what appeals to you about the adventure. Is it the genre? the plot? the locale? If it is a mystery based in Las Vegas, is the idea of running an adventure in Las Vegas what appeals to you, or is it running an adventure in a backdrop of glamour and gambling? If the latter is the case, then the adventure could be moved to Atlantic City, Lake Tahoe, or a city in a fantasy world. You should look past the trappings to the real draw of the adventure. When you know what you like about the adventure, you know what not to change.

3. *Find what you need to change:* Examine the adventure again, with an eye for ways to mesh the adventure with your campaign. Examine the characters, creatures, items, locales, geographical features, events, and histories (both stated and implied), and modify them to suit your world.

With regards to the characters and creatures involved, will using certain NPC and monsters from your world rather than using the author's NPCs and monsters change their motivations or actions in any

way? Are any characters, PCs or NPCs, in your world similar to any of the module's given characters? If so, replace some of the stock characters with your own. Take Mung, the wilderness guide whom the module recommends your party hire, and replace him with Trasker, the barbarian hireling of a PC in your group, making sure that Trasker knows all that Mung was supposed to know. This is a great step toward making the adventure look like it was written just for your world.

You can also modify the adventure to make it more suited to your style or to simply be different. You may make some creatures more powerful, weaken some, and completely rework others. NPCs that the author largely ignored can be given larger roles, while some the author put in the spotlight can be downplayed.

You may have to modify the history of certain items, magical or otherwise, to make them fit your world. You may also want to simply get rid of some items, either because you do not want the PCs to have them (no *spheres of annihilation*, for example) or because they simply do not have a place in your world (no *dragonlances* in a non-DRAGONLANCE® saga campaign). You can also replace stock items with similar items that already have histories in your world, or with items that you want to introduce to the campaign. Whatever you do, make sure it doesn't adversely affect the adventure. If you replace or modify an essential item, make sure that you somehow make that item unnecessary or move its responsibility somewhere else. A *ring of comprehend languages*, for example, could be replaced with a multilingual NPC critical to the adventure's success.

When changing locales, make sure the module's locale could exist in your world. You could use dimension travel, planar travel, or time travel to get the characters to the exact location of the adventure, but this turns the adventure into a dimension-travel, planar-travel, or time-travel adventure. This is not always bad, but it's usually best to place the adventure somewhere within the confines of the 'normal' world of your campaign. A GANGBUSTERS™ adventure based in Chicago could become an AD&D® adventure based in a fantasy city of your campaign, preferably a city with a reputation for organized crime. You must also ensure that the geography of the adventure fits the geography of the area where you place it. Geography can usually be modified after you find a place for the adventure, but important geographical features may limit the possible locations (if the module requires a volcano or a seaport, you need a volcano or a seaport).

Look at the history involved, too. Would cities, towns, and villages have developed the same in your world as they did in the author's? Would they have the same names? If your world is based on Celtic mythology, a town full of Spanish names

will appear out of place. You should edit the snippets of history the author occasionally mentions, modifying them with your knowledge of your world's history. Tales of great battles with giants thus become tales of great battles with hobgoblins. Also, a background history is often implied in various parts of the adventure. If, in your world, ghouls congregate only around areas of ancient battles, and part of the adventure involves meeting a large number of ghouls, there is an implied history: A battle occurred in the adventuring area sometime in the past. You must ensure that such a history could exist before putting the situation in the adventure. You may even want to make such a history important to the adventure to anchor that adventure firmly to your world.

Now look at the events in the module. Would the reasons for the adventure's existence make sense in your world? Political tensions, religious battles, abandoned strongholds—all can generate adventures and (if the backgrounds are generic enough) can be modified to fit the events of your campaign. Think of adventures in terms of their plots, and you can use them regardless of genre. Here are some adventures whose basic structures are well suited to most genres:

1. An immensely powerful being or group becomes interested in the powerful beings of this world, and sends them to fight for survival on a patchwork planet, continent, or city complex far from home (MHSP1 *The Secret Wars*, for TSR's MARVEL SUPER HEROES™ game).

2. Lost on a previously unexplored planet or continent, the players must interact with numerous alien races in their bid to find a way home. On the way they discover that, to help the races survive, they must fight a mysterious villain and bring the races together to fend off an attack from outside (the *Volturnus* series, for TSR's STAR FRONTIERS® game).

3. An expedition is lost in an uncharted jungle. In their quest to save the group, the characters come face-to-face with unimaginable horror and confront a villain from the worlds forgotten past (*The Pits of Bendal-Dolum*, from *Cthulhu Classics*, for Chaosium's CALL OF CTHULHU® game).

## Crossing genres

One of the advantages gained from using commercial adventures is the ability to switch genres within a campaign. If you want to give your fantasy game a taste of horror, go out and buy a good horror adventure. If you want to give it a taste of mystery, buy a good mystery adventure. Simply convert the game mechanics to your own game system, but keep the theme. Crossing genres increases the number of commercial adventures available for your campaign, but you must keep an eye out for special circumstances. Situations tailored for one genre can have

difficulties in another. A major villain in one of TSR's TOP SECRET/S.I.™ adventures may have gone to great lengths to construct a cell to hold her enemies. This same cell may be worthless against a 3rd-level wizard with a *knock* spell. If the villain is altered to be someone who originated from the fantasy campaign world, she will have taken different precautions against escape: a permanent *silence* spell cast over the area by an allied mage, perhaps, or part of the locking mechanism kept out of range of a *knock* spell.

You should also be careful not to lose the feel of things when converting. Remember that the simple conversion of statistics will not always be the correct thing to do. You should also keep in mind what the statistics mean in relation to other characters.

For example, if you use this article's guidelines to convert Thor's strength of 25 from the AD&D 1st Edition *Legends & Lore* (page 106) to Hero Games' CHAMPIONS® system, you would find out how much he can lift (about 1,500 lbs.) and then check what strength is necessary to lift that amount in the latter system (this is also 25). However, remember that a score of 25 in the AD&D game is the limit for any personal characteristic. When converting Thor to the CHAMPIONS game, you will probably want to increase his strength even more so that he is one of the strongest beings on your world. Keep the proper balance and feel of things in mind when converting.

## Genre by genre

Each genre has its own idiosyncrasies and special problems. Only a few problems are noted here, but these are among the most important points. Each section first looks at going between game systems within the same genre, then using adventures from that genre in other genres.

**Fantasy:** Fantasy is the most popular RPG genre, so you will have lots of extra material if you use commercial fantasy adventures. Remember, though, that if you cross game systems, mechanics like spell levels, psionics, and spell-casting will change greatly. High-level spells in one game might be low-level spells in another. Ensure that the adventure can handle the spells used in your campaign, and that the spells necessary to complete the adventure are available. If the adventure assumes unlimited spell-casting (generally with a spell-point system) or the use of different spell components, various things within the adventure may change also. For example, if a spell requires a frog's leg in one game and a dragon's leg in another, the frequency of that spell's casting will probably change.

When going from fantasy to other genres, you need to remember that most fantasy adventures virtually require a spell-caster in the party. Psionics, superpowers, and technology sometimes make up for a lack of magic; take this into account if transferring to genres or games

without magic. Also, NPCs in fantasy adventures may have too many magical items, even for other games using magic, if magic is less common and more mysterious in your campaign (as it often is in the horror genre, for example). You will then need to reduce the amount of magical items carried by the module's NPCs, possibly replacing them with technological items or skills if essential.

**Modern Era:** This category includes espionage, detective, police, and military systems. One thing to watch when using adventures from different modern-era game systems is the varying level of technology across these games. If the module's author expects the PCs to view the villains with their mini X-ray cameras, and the best your PCs can come up with is a 1932 flash camera, you will have to modify some situations and events.

When using these adventures in campaigns of another genre, remember that the adventures probably assume a complete lack of magic on the part of the PCs. A single AD&D game *locate object* or *passwall* spell might drop the playing time to a couple of minutes if care is not taken. It shouldn't be too hard to add precautions against magic, but keep in mind that it will probably have to be done. Also, most of these adventures are tailored to above-average (but still normal) characters who rely mostly on cunning, intelligence, and skill against similar NPCs. Care must be taken to keep an adventure interesting in other genres with tougher characters. Modern-era adventures most suitable for conversion are those requiring deduction and reasoning, which is generally expected of players in any game system.

**Science Fiction/Superhero:** Science-fiction and superhero adventures are probably the easiest to convert from game to game within a single genre. SF adventures tend to have few restrictions as to what can happen and how it can happen, since science fiction encompasses a wide range of possible scenarios. Superhero adventures are easy to convert between game systems because the genre has been so well defined by comic books, and most superhero games fall within the comic-book framework.

When using science-fiction and superhero adventures in other genres, look out for the level of technology involved. If you are converting such a module to a fantasy world and plan to keep the technology level of the NPCs (they're part of an alien invasion, perhaps), you must be sure that the PCs have enough resources, magical or otherwise, to balance the NPCs. If you replace the technology, be creative; it need not all be replaced with magic. For example, a science-fiction pirate with an interstellar corsair equipped with a massive computer and a crew armed with lasers and vibroblades might become a fantasy RPG pirate with an ocean-going corsair, a crew armed with crossbows and rapiers, and a reliable sage. Much technology can

thus be replaced with its medieval counterpart.

Trickery can replace special powers. If a villain in a superhero adventure is supposed to be able to teleport, and you don't want this in your detective campaign, make the villain a master of disappearance. His house will have many secret doors and passageways to effectively "teleport" him to different areas. Away from home, he could use manhole covers, crowds, and carefully planned getaways involving vehicles that can be hidden in other vehicles—driving a Porsche into a semi-trailer, or a motorcycle into a van. Even the most amazing powers can be mimicked with careful planning and the correct circumstances.

**Horror:** When using adventures from one horror game system to another, be careful that you do not violate what that game considers the "rules" of the unknown. Many horror games have very strict views on the unknown forces that the PCs combat. When converting a CALL OF CTHULHU adventure to a "standard" ghost-story adventure, you may have to use demons in place of the major Cthulhoid monsters.

When using horror adventures in campaigns of other genres, your major problem will probably be the lack of detail on certain areas of the adventure. PCs in horror adventures are rarely as powerful as their counterparts in other games (weakness feeds the horror atmosphere of the game). Thus, where the author expects the PCs to be forced to go one way, the fantasy PCs in your campaign may decide to go another way ("So there's a vampire. Let's kill him and see where he came from!"). You should find these situations and take care of them before running the adventure. The most common ways of dealing with this are:

1. Expand the adventure as necessary.
2. Modify the adventure so the players will be forced into the correct direction after all.
3. Replace the locale with one you are already familiar with, making it easier to wing it when the players go in unplanned directions.

There are other things to be watch. Most horror games do not include a power like a 1st-level cleric's undead-turning capability in the AD&D game. Most adventures will not be written with this possibility in mind, so you should pay close attention to it when converting a horror adventure to fantasy.

**Funny/Comic:** It can be fun to occasionally take an adventure from a tongue-in-cheek game system such as West End Games' PARANOIA™ or GHOSTBUSTERS™ adventure, modify it to suit your needs, and surprise your players with an off-the-wall adventure in another genre. The main thing to worry about is whether or not your players are up to such an adventure. Some players resent sustained comic relief in an otherwise serious campaign,

especially if they don't get to play that often. If your players do not want an adventure of this type, don't force it on them. If in doubt, simply ask or have another adventure ready in case the first adventure doesn't seem to be going over well. Converting a serious module to a comic game system has some advantages (e.g., a CALL OF CTHULHU module for the GHOSTBUSTERS game), but too much seriousness could damage the humorous atmosphere. A good dose of realism and fear, however, can often heighten a session's comic and heroic effect.

**War games:** War-game scenarios make very good backgrounds for role-playing games, especially for wars set in modern times. A war-game scenario based on the Battle of Normandy, for example, would make a great background for a superhero time-travel adventure. You will have to make your own decisions about what happens as far as the battles are concerned, possibly modifying the expected outcome depending on the actions of the PCs. See the STAR FRONTIERS adventure, SF2 *Starspawn of Voltarnus*, for a good example of dealing with war in a PC-oriented adventure.

## Crossing game systems

When crossing game systems, some game mechanics in a given module must be converted to your own system. After replacing some of the original NPCs and items with those from your campaign, this problem will be lessened, but some characters, items, and situations will remain to be dealt with. Not everything must be converted to your game system, however. Characters in encounters that involve only conversation do not need conversion, and neither will combat encounters that will give the PCs no serious trouble. You can easily fake this from your own experience.

Anyone who will return later in your campaign should be converted. Likewise, the people or things involved in pivotal encounters that can give the PCs a hard time should be converted. If the possibility exists in combat that the PCs could lose or that the PCs could be weakened enough to lose later, don't fake it; the situation will get too confusing if you don't have things written down. Once you decide who and what to convert, the question becomes how best to convert them. These four methods that give the best results:

1. Use your own judgment, possibly in combination with the next three methods.
2. Drop specific rules in the original game system to use rules for the same effects in your own game system.
3. Translate effects and statistics from the original game system to their real-world counterparts, then to your own system's statistics.
4. Translate statistics in the original system to percentage values, then back to statistics in your game system.

**Using your judgment:** The simplest way to convert items and characters from

one game to another is simply to use your own judgment. You must be familiar with both games to do this, and must be at ease with the system you use regularly. This system works best for things that you are modifying drastically. For example, if you are using CALL OF CTHULHU game monsters to create a Lovecraft mythology in your world, but are drastically changing the monsters' looks and abilities, this method will probably be the way to go.

**Specific rules:** The simplest things to convert are situations and items that have specific rules in your game system. Falling damage is a good example of this. If the AD&D adventure states "The pit is 30 feet deep; characters falling in take 3d6 damage" but you are using CHAMPIONS game PCs, you would look up falling damage in the CHAMPIONS rules and note damage to be 15d6. A D&D® game's saving throw vs. poison would become a GAMMA WORLD® game's resistance roll. Standard animals, weapons, armor, and supplies can easily be replaced, as most games list all standard items and their statistics. Within the fantasy genre, many of the monsters (skeletons, goblins, dragons, etc.) are also duplicated. You do have to be careful that the names don't cover completely different monsters. While goblins in one world might be short humanoids appearing in great numbers, in another world they might be huge monsters appearing in small groups. In that case, you could replace the goblin with another monster similar to the original game's interpretation of goblins, or rename the monster and create or convert it as normal.

**Games and reality:** Some conversions will not be quite as easy as the previous ones. Character abilities are a good example of this. Many have similar names without quite the same meaning. The CHAMPIONS game, for example, has three character abilities describing intellect and mental faculties: intelligence, ego, and presence. FGU's SPACE OPERA™ game has nine: empathy, intelligence, psionics, intuition, bravery, leadership, general technical aptitude, mechanical aptitude, and electrical aptitude. How can abilities with varying meanings be correlated?

The best way is to look at what the characters can do. Games often tell how to determine a character's IQ from certain mental capabilities, usually involving intelligence tests. You can use this to determine intelligence in other games. Determine the IQ of the character in the first game, then determine what statistics are required for that IQ in the second.

Easy stuff should be done first to lay the groundwork for some of the harder things. As an example, suppose you have to convert the SPACE OPERA game's scores for strength, physique, and constitution to the AD&D game's strength and constitution scores. Strength is the first one. In AD&D games, strength measures almost nothing but carrying capacity—brute force. There is a table in the AD&D

*Player's Handbook* that lists strength values and carrying capacities. Take the SPACE OPERA character's carrying capacity (determined from strength, physique, and constitution) and determine, from the table in the *Player's Handbook*, what value is needed to lift that amount. You now have the character's strength. From there, go on to work out the rest of the abilities.

**Numbers to percentages:** If you are using an adventure from another game system in your campaign, and you have access to the rules this adventure was written for, you can be much more specific when converting the adventure. If you know the dice used for determining characteristics, events, and actions, you can determine the exact chances of certain characteristics being generated, certain events occurring, or of certain actions being successful.

On the linear die roll tables provided in this article (1d4, 1d6, 1d8, 1d10, 1d12, and 1d20), the chance of getting any single number is given in parentheses after the column title (e.g., the chance of getting a 5 on 1d8 is 12.5%). On the V and bell-curve die-roll tables, the chance of getting each number is given in the "Single %" column (e.g., the chance of getting a 13 on 3d6 is 9.7%). For both sets of tables, the "Cumulative %" column gives the chance of getting that number or less (e.g., the chance of getting 7 or less on 1d12 is 58.3%). To discover the chance of rolling a certain number or greater, look in the "Reverse %" column (e.g., the chance of rolling 19 or greater on 2d10 is 3%). To find the chance of rolling a certain collection of numbers, add up their individual percentages. The chance of rolling a 4, 5, 7, or 9 on 1d10 is 10% + 10% + 10% + 10% = 40%. The chance of rolling a 4, 5, 7, or 9 on 3d6 is 1.4% + 2.8% + 6.9% + 11.6% = 22.7%. Suppose that the adventure states that a 6 or greater is required to save vs. an event. You know that the game system uses 2d6 for saving throws. You want to convert this to a game system that uses 1d20 for saving throws, to be able to keep the character's ability modifications correct (from magical rings, dexterity, etc.). Also, you want the saving throw to be vs. a number or less. Look at the 2d6 table. The chance of rolling 6 or greater is found on the "Reverse %" column: 72.2%. Now, go to the 1d20 table. The nearest percentage to 72.2% is 70%, which is 14 or less. If you wanted to have the players roll high, it would be 7 or more.

If you want to convert statistics using this method, you can do it using the "Cumulative %" column. For example, constitution in AD&D games is rolled on 3d6. If you wish to convert an AD&D game constitution of 13 to a STAR FRONTIERS game stamina, find the chance of getting 13 or less on 3d6: 83.8%. Since the STAR FRONTIERS game uses percentile dice to determine abilities, just look up this percentage on that game's ability table. This gives a stamina of 60.

When converting statistics, you must sometimes combine many statistics in one game to get a statistic for another, or go from one statistic to many. Going from SPACE OPERA game's nine mental statistics to the AD&D game's three (charisma, intelligence, and wisdom) requires determining which statistics in the former correspond to those statistics in the latter. Make a list of the statistics in the game system to which you are converting; after each of those statistics, list the relevant statistics in the first game system, in order from most relevant to least relevant. For example, to convert an AD&D game statistic (in boldface) to a SPACE OPERA game statistic (in regular type), you might list the following:

**Intelligence:** Intelligence, General Technical Aptitude, Mechanical Aptitude, Electrical Aptitude, Psionics

**Wisdom:** Intuition, Empathy, Bravery, Psionics

**Charisma:** Leadership, Empathy, Bravery, Intuition, Psionics

When determining AD&D game intelligence, SPACE OPERA game intelligence would be the main factor. A high aptitude score might make up for a low intelligence, however, or vice versa. Likewise, in order to have psionic ability in AD&D games, a high intelligence, wisdom, or charisma is required, so SPACE OPERA game psionics might influence intelligence as well.

### Final words

One of the main problems you may have crossing game systems will not be crossing genres, but crossing between mythic game systems and realistic game systems. A mythic game system assumes that the PCs are the major characters in the adventure. If the majority of the PCs don't survive to the end of the story, the story probably wouldn't have been written about them. PCs often get breaks that are not realistic. Even if the-PCs do die, their battles and deeds make stories, myths, and legends to be handed down for generations.

In realistic game systems, it is not assumed that the PCs are going to survive to the end of the story. In these games, the chances of death and injury are considerable. A single sword stroke might kill a healthy character. Realistic game systems shift part of the focus of the adventure from the story to PC survival. When using an adventure from a mythic game system in a realistic game system, combat scenarios should probably be toned down, as should most damage-causing events. PCs may have to be given strong inducement to finish the adventure. When survival becomes more important, PCs in a realistic game system might not take the initiative as often as PCs in a mythic system.

On the other hand, when using adventures from a realistic game system in a mythic system, you may find that many of

**Table 1:  
Linear Die Roll Probabilities**

1d4 (25%)	1d8 (12.5%)	Cumulative %	Reverse %
—	1	12.5%	100%
1	2	25%	87.5%
—	3	37.5%	75%
2	4	50%	62.5%
—	5	62.5%	50%
3	6	75%	37.5%
—	7	87.5%	25%
4	8	100%	12.5%

1d6(16.7%)	1d12(8.3%)	Cumulative %	Reverse %
—	1	8.3%	100%
1	2	16.7%	91.7%
—	3	25%	83.3%
2	4	33.3%	75%
—	5	41.7%	66.7%
3	6	50%	58.3%
—	7	58.3%	50%
4	8	66.7%	41.7%
—	9	75%	33.3%
5	10	83.3%	25%
—	11	91.7%	16.7%
6	12	100%	8.3%

1d10 (10%)	1d20 (5%)	Cumulative %	Reverse %
—	1	5%	100%
1	2	10%	95%
—	3	15%	90%
2	4	20%	85%
—	5	25%	80%
3	6	30%	75%
—	7	35%	70%
4	8	40%	65%
—	9	45%	60%
5	10	50%	55%
—	11	55%	50%
6	12	60%	45%
—	13	65%	40%
7	14	70%	35%
—	15	75%	30%
8	16	80%	25%
—	17	85%	20%
9	18	90%	15%
—	19	95%	10%
10	20	100%	5%

**Table 2  
V and Bell-Curve Die Roll Probabilities**

2d6	Single %	Cumulative %	Reverse %
2	2.8%	2.8%	100%
3	5.6%	8.3%	97.2%
4	8.3%	16.7%	91.7%
5	11.1%	27.8%	83.3%
6	13.9%	41.7%	72.2%
7	16.7%	58.3%	58.3%
8	13.9%	72.2%	41.7%
9	11.1%	83.3%	27.8%
10	8.3%	91.7%	16.7%
11	5.6%	97.2%	8.3%
12	2.8%	100%	2.8%

Table 2 (cont.)

<b>3d6</b>	<b>Single %</b>	<b>Cumulative %</b>	<b>Reverse %</b>
3	.5%	.5%	100%
4	1.4%	1.9%	99.5%
5	2.8%	4.6%	98.1%
6	4.6%	9.3%	95.4%
7	6.9%	16.2%	90.7%
8	9.7%	25.9%	83.8%
9	11.6%	37.5%	74.1%
10	12.5%	50%	62.5%
11	12.5%	62.5%	50%
12	11.6%	74.1%	37.5%
13	9.7%	83.8%	25.9%
14	6.9%	90.7%	16.2%
15	4.6%	95.4%	9.3%
16	2.8%	98.1%	4.6%
17	1.4%	99.5%	1.9%
18	.5%	100%	.5%
<b>4d6</b>	<b>Single %</b>	<b>Cumulative %</b>	<b>Reverse %</b>
4	.1%	.1%	100%
5	.3%	.4%	99.9%
6	.8%	1.2%	99.6%
7	1.5%	2.7%	98.8%
8	2.7%	5.4%	97.3%
9	4.3%	9.7%	94.6%
10	6.2%	15.9%	90.3%
11	8%	23.9%	84.1%
12	9.6%	33.6%	76.1%
13	10.8%	44.4%	66.4%
14	11.3%	55.6%	55.6%
15	10.8%	66.4%	44.4%
16	9.6%	76.1%	33.6%
17	8%	84.1%	23.9%
18	6.2%	90.3%	15.9%
19	4.3%	94.6%	9.7%
20	2.7%	97.3%	5.4%
21	1.5%	98.8%	2.7%
22	.8%	99.6%	1.2%
23	.3%	99.9%	.4%
24	.1%	100%	.1%
<b>2d10</b>	<b>Single %</b>	<b>Cumulative %</b>	<b>Reverse %</b>
2	1%	1%	100%
3	2%	3%	99%
4	3%	6%	97%
5	4%	10%	94%
6	5%	15%	90%
7	6%	21%	85%
8	7%	28%	73%
9	8%	36%	72%
10	9%	45%	64%
11	10%	55%	55%
12	3%	64%	45%
13	8%	72%	36%
14	7%	79%	28%
15	6%	85%	21%
16	5%	90%	15%
17	4%	94%	10%
18	3%	97%	6%
19	2%	99%	3%
20	1%	100%	1%

the “nudges” that the author gives the PCs become less necessary. In a mythic game system, the heat of battle and the chance for glory are often enough to move PCs toward the climax of the adventure.

Another problem comes up when converting adventures to a game very different from its original game system. This involves overestimating the effects of one aspect of the adventure—most often in overestimating the effects of technology in a primitive setting. For example, many modern weaponry systems have been added to the AD&D game, and quite a few give large damage values for handgun fire, ranging from 1d8 to 2d6 or more. A real-world deer-hunting bow (equivalent to a long bow in AD&D game terms), when used correctly, propels its arrow with the same velocity as a .22 rifle bullet. The bullet won’t do more damage than the arrow. The gun has a higher fire rate and is easier to shoot (that’s why it overtook the bow and arrow in our own history), but the bow is a deadly weapon in itself. Similar problems occur when converting martial-arts systems into games with only normal hand-to-hand fighting.

Be sure to replace rather than redo. This drastically cuts the amount of conversion work and makes you that much more familiar with the characters, things, and places. Don’t replace what originally drew you to the adventure, however. Put lots of little notes in the margins of the module, so you’ll remember what you’ve changed when you start running the adventure. Keep notes about what rules cover the events being talked about, what saving throws are required, and what pages you might want to refer to in your rule books or other references.

Use works of fiction as adventure sources. The methods given here for crossing genres and game systems will also work for taking ideas from source other than role-playing, such as films, books, and the real world. Life is interesting—and never let the PCs forget it!



EATING RIGHT IS HIGHLY LOGICAL.

# The Pitfalls of Game Mastering

Every GM needs a *detect gaming traps* spell

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With all the talk of the comparative value of role-playing game systems, one truth always seems to be forgotten: The quality of an RPG depends not only on the system, but also on its game master.

This article isn't about rules. It's intended to help GMs become better by pointing out common mistakes made by GMs—a sort of GM's "Hall of Shame." It is hoped that, with preparation and practice, we may learn to avoid such problems as those discussed here.

Being a good GM usually means lots of work. The best-plotted campaigns with the most interesting NPCs, situations, and societies are the hardest to create. Anyone can run a game in which the players make no choices and just roll dice. That's why many role-playing game systems encourage some heavy-handed manipulation by the GM in their basic rules. You don't always have to think to be a GM. It is very easy for people to start their careers as GMs at this point.

Yet most experienced GMs get enjoyment out of running detailed campaigns. There is nothing quite like hearing your players spend lots of time discussing the situations in your world and what to do about them. If anything is worth doing, it is worth doing well, which is why this article was written.

If you are a GM, show this article to your players and have a talk with them about it. If they point out a couple of things they've noticed about your gaming





style, that's okay; nobody's perfect. But if they point out lots of examples and really think there's a problem, then you should consider changing your style of game mastering.

### Improbable plots

In RPGs, plots are not set in stone. A plot is often just a situation, a set of goals for the player characters to achieve, and an outline of what is most likely to happen. Even though RPG plots are often simple, many GMs still make mistakes in setting them up. The following are the most common plotting mistakes.

### Monty Haul returns

GM: "Inside the chest, Herkimer finds three artifacts, a wishing lamp, 10,000 platinum pieces, and a lightsabre."

Player: "Oh, okay. What's in the other chest?"

Monty Haul (from Monty Hall, the host of the *Let's Make a Deal* TV show) is renowned. GMs want players to have fun, and players have fun when they win. So Monty Haul GMs plot their games so that players win all of the time. What these GMs don't realize is that it isn't just the reward but also the challenge of overcoming obstacles that makes winning fun.

High-powered gaming isn't always a Monty Haul game. If everything in the game—PCs, danger, and treasure—is on a high level of power, the game can be balanced. A game is "Monty Haul" when the treasure is unrealistic or out of proportion to the danger involved in getting it.

**Solution:** Learn from other GMs what the risk/reward ratio should be, or examine the scenario packs from the game company that makes your RPG (though poorly written modules can also be Monty Haul; check them with care). Ask yourself "Who put this loot in here?" and "If all this stuff is here, why hasn't someone else come along and taken it?" Make sure NPCs use the magical treasure they have for attack and defense, unless they're unusually stupid.

### Ritual sacrifice

GM: "You're all dead again—for the third time tonight! Things just aren't working out for you, are they?"

Player: "Yeah, our guys couldn't even touch that giant robot with all the nukes it was firing."

Ritual sacrifice is the inverse of Monty Haul: too much danger for too little treasure and experience. All paths lead to certain death, and the players get frustrated. Though some people say this is "realistic," remember that stories aren't told about corpses. Players play heroes, the lucky few adventurers whose lives are interesting, not the many others who fail to find fortune or fail to survive at all. As such, it should be more likely that the hints of treasure these characters get are

true and that enemies may underestimate the heroes.

A tough game isn't always a ritual sacrifice. If PCs can choose their targets and overcome obstacles with clever planning, then the challenges are reasonable. Ritual sacrifice occurs only when you always kill the PCs, no matter what they do.

**Solution:** Loosen up your game a little. Don't use death to control your players' PCs. Give them a chance to identify dangers before getting in too deep. Ask yourself "Where does the enemy get the resources to do that?" and "What are some ways in which this monster could be killed by the PCs?" Use common sense when following random-encounter tables, and don't get so involved with your NPCs that you want to *make* them always win.

### Overworked cliches

GM: "Your characters just happen to be drinking in a saloon, and this dark-cloaked man sits down next to one guy..."

Player: "My gunfighter says, 'What's the mission, bub?'"

Every genre has its cliches. When moderately used, they can be fun: the evil wizard in the dark castle, the heroic space knight, the beautiful captive heroine, etc. However, cliches become a problem when you start repeating yourself. If every bar has a fight, every stranger offers adventure, and all the untrustworthy PCs suddenly meet and decide to join forces, then you need to change things.

**Solution:** Think of some cliches—and then avoid them. Plan reasonable ways for PCs to meet: in mercenary hiring halls, in churches, through mutual friends, anywhere but in the local tavern. Don't repeat the same plots very often, even if they were successful. Make everyday events (such as getting a drink) be normal 99% of the time; thus, when something unusual does happen, it really is surprising.

### Missing motivation

Player: "What's there to do around this town?"

GM: "Nothing."

Player: "Well, how about in the capital?"

GM: "Nothing really exciting."

Some GMs fail to motivate their players. Sometimes this is tolerable because players will come up with their own motivations for their characters—greed and ambition, for example. But other motivations are often much better. For instance, PCs will take risks for the sake of revenge that they'd never take for money or fame.

**Solution:** Encourage the PCs to adopt motivations that fit your world. Provide a variety of motivations so that you can always tailor a plot around one of them and get the PCs' attention. Think of alternatives to seeking money and power.

### Single-path plots

Player: "Wow, that was tough! We barely

beat that guy. Our group will wait for the gang leader to recover so we can talk to him. What happens next?"

GM: "I don't know."

Player: "What do you mean you don't know? You're the GM!"

GM: "Your group was supposed to lose and be thrown into the gang leader's secret prison. I don't what to do next."

Single-path plots are so rigid that if anything doesn't go as planned, everything falls apart. To force things along, many GMs use overt plot manipulations (discussed later). Don't expect PCs to do even the most logical things; you will do better by plotting several possible alternatives.

**Solution:** Don't make plots that depend on the PCs winning or losing a fight, solving a puzzle, or failing all saving throws at once. Players are a constant source of surprises. Also, don't make plots depend upon dice rolls (such as getting past a locked door when the party's thief has only a 70% chance of picking the lock). Provide plot alternatives. Run several plot lines at once, so if the players have trouble in one place, they can do something else.

### Muddled manipulations

Every game needs some manipulation. PCs usually need a little push to get them going in the right direction, but players should not be aware of this guidance. If the PCs are forced along a preplanned plot no matter what they do, you are doing something wrong. You make the players simply dice rollers, and they will probably get frustrated with your game.

### Deus ex machina

GM: "Suddenly, the sky fills with avenging angels!"

Player: "Gosh, third time this week.

Look, are they going to 'un-toad' my thief now or not?"

GM: "Yes—but you are suddenly teleported to an arena by a mad wizard, and have to fight ... giant scorpions!"

*Deus ex machina* means "god from the machine." In Greek plays, no matter what happened, everything was solved in the end when a god (played by an actor strung up on ropes) came down and changed everything. In an RPG, it's the same idea. Under *deus ex machina* GMs, the game's rules, world, and story are all changed on whim, often several times per game. This problem often goes hand-in-hand with Monty Haul troubles: The GM gives away tons of treasure, then has NPC gods take it all away again. This is the poorest way to manipulate plots, and few players stand it for long.

**Solution:** Use published scenario packs and game aids to see how plots are put together. Talk to other GMs and learn the ways in which they encourage and motivate PCs. Take time to plot your adventures and explain your world. Don't arbitrarily change the world later or lead

PCs around by their noses.

### Changes vs. cheating

Player A: "Bret jumps over the pit! Oops—he missed his agility roll by one. He's already badly injured, so I guess my character's dead."

GM: "No... he just barely made it. He's okay. [To another player] "Your turn."

Player B: "So Black Bart jumps—uh, oh. He also rolled one less than his agility. But he should be fine; he has lots of hit points left!"

GM: "Wrong. Bart fell into the pit full of rattlesnakes, taking 22 points of damage."

Altering the rules is fine. Changing the rules to manipulate the plot is not. Changing them back and forth depending on the situation is even worse.

**Solution:** Be brave and stick with the rules as written, even if it means killing a character. If you must alter the rules, don't alter them to punish or reward players. Know the rules well before you try to change them. Check for loopholes in your new rules so you don't have to change the rules back again once the game starts. Always be consistent. If you have to shade things, do it by fudging dice rolls behind a GM's screen, not by changing the rules. Finally, discuss rules changes with players; it's often fun to talk about "what will happen if" situations in your group.

### Unwanted interference

GM: "Okay, stop the arguing! Your group divides the treasure up the way I've written it down."

Player: "Hey! You're the GM. Why are you deciding how we divide things up?"

GM: "Because I'm the GM!"

The GM has every right to control the "above-game" action: who gets to talk, what the rules are, who rolls dice, etc. But the "in-game" PC interaction is the province of the players. Don't interfere with it. This doesn't mean that NPCs can't react to what PCs say; it just means that you should apply no godlike powers on the PC actions.

**Solution:** Stay out of "in-character" arguments, but firmly control all the player-to-player arguments. Let NPCs make in-character comments, but don't give them godlike knowledge (see "Oracles"). Add time limits to the plot so the PCs don't have all day to get their job done—and all day to argue about it.

### Forced marches

Player: "We don't care what the reward is. Our characters are *not* going to mount an attack on the Nine Hells. Period."

GM: "Look, do you want to play the game or not?"

Another poor way to manipulate PC actions is to force actions into a set mold. If the PCs don't do what a game-forcing GM wants them to do, the GM refuses to play. If a PC feels compelled to leave the party because of things that have happened, that GM won't let the player play again. If the PC does leave for a time, the GM refuses to give the character any experience points. This is simply wrong.

It's okay to force the *tone* of a campaign ("I'm doing a science-fiction game" or "Good PCs only for this next scenario"), but don't use this to influence what the PCs decide to do. Players shouldn't have to worry that what they do will change whether you will be their GM or not.

**Solution:** Don't force the players to send their PCs where they don't want them to go. Anticipate the players when possible. Give the PCs a reason to go on the adventures you've planned and to stay together as a coherent group. If a PC performs a dangerous or solitary side errand, have a gaming session with him some other time to resolve this. Make it known that unplanned actions are not going to suddenly stop the game.

### Railroading

GM: "So one of your characters pulls the lever on the wall by the computer console, and a huge—"

Player: "No, wait! No one in the group is



going to pull that lever! We never said anyone was doing that!"

GM: "Fine. Suddenly, Zack the astrogator trips, flails his arms, and accidentally pulls the lever. Just then, a huge ..."

This is another poor plot manipulation that will get players very upset, because you take away the only thing they have control over—their characters. Again, if you designed the plot with enough flexibility in the first place, you won't have to railroad your PCs.

Solution: If your plot absolutely demands you to railroad the PCs, use the "magician's force" rule (also known as "Heads, I win—tails, you lose"). Simply make the consequence you want to occur happen anyway, and tailor the explanation for why it happened as a result of what the PCs did. In the previous example, if the plot demands that the PCs fall into a trap, have the lever spring the trap if the PCs pull on it—and have the trap spring if the PCs don't pull it (the lever having been designed to prevent the trap from going off). The PCs can't win, of course, but they don't know that.

The "magician's force" rule is dangerous, however. If you overuse it, the players will catch on, and they may decide your game isn't worth playing if they have no say in anything that goes on.

### Rewriting the past

GM: "You open your chamber door—and you see Karzat the Merciless!"

Player: "WHAT?! What do you mean? Karzat's dead! My paladin killed him months ago!"

GM: "Ah, you thought he died, but he didn't!"

Player: "My paladin cut off his head and burned the head and body separately! Even the clerics said Karzat was dead, and their gods told them so!"

GM: "Well . . . that was just a robot. This is the real Karzat."

Player: "The robot could bleed and be burned up?"

It's okay to fill in details about the past, even details that really didn't happen (you can always say that the little things weren't noticed at the time), but altering major events in the past is not okay. Even comic-book writers have shied away from this in recent years (well, some of them have), so unless you are running a campy comic-book super-hero game in which all the villains keep returning from the grave, don't do it.

I know some of you will still change the past anyway, so here is some advice: If you must do it, use subtlety. Always leave a few dangling plot threads on which to dangle your rewritten version of the past. Give a few bits of needless detail as the adventure progresses, so that you have something later on which to hang your rewritten plot. (For example, the shadowy figure the paladin thought he saw before

he killed Karzat was actually an old necromancer friend of Karzat, who had just taken a tissue sample of the evil warlord for a clone spell.)

Solution: Leave the past alone; what's done is done. Be willing to see NPCs die permanently and past history remain unchanged. To avoid losing NPCs you need around, figure out escape plans and alternate defense plots long before those NPCs need to use them. If you must change the past, do it as seldom as possible.

### Unlikely actions

Player: "While the tavern keeper is out, my assassin will clean out his till."

GM: "Right then, the tavern keeper runs back inside the building with an axe and attacks your guy."

Player: "Gosh, it's amazing how a tavern keeper can see through walls!"

GM: "No, no—he just decided to turn around then."

Make sure everything in your game is logical. Just because things aren't going the way you planned them doesn't mean you should give NPCs extra knowledge or make implausible or illogical events start happening whenever the PCs try to get clever. It's okay to cheat a little when you're the GM, but you have to be subtle. Work within the world you've defined; don't change it at your own whim to get back at "bad PCs."

Using implausible actions to help the PCs is about as common as using it to hurt them and is just as bad. Many GMs have their monsters start fighting over the treasure in the middle of combat just as the PCs start to lose, thus giving the PCs a huge advantage. Properly played PCs do not gain or lose intelligence points depending upon how well the players are doing.

Solution: Use logic in playing out situations; don't stretch everyone's credulity with claims of "coincidence" or "it must be magical." Don't let the current gaming situation cloud your judgment about how the game world should work. Remember that most situations last only a short time, but you may want to run your game world for a long time.

### Saying too much

Player: "Boy, that scientist sure is a swell guy! He really helped my character."

GM: "Of course, he might have ulterior motives for helping you."

Player: "Hey, I hadn't thought of that. Maybe he does!"

GM: "But remember—your character doesn't know that."

Every GM lets things slip, but some make a habit of it. Telling players how to do things makes them mere dice rollers, so avoid this. Few players can genuinely keep the information that they know as players separated from what their PCs know. Even if they can't, it's more fun to actually figure out puzzles than to be told the

answers. Keep surprises and secrets to yourself until they're ready to be revealed.

Note that improper commenting doesn't mean just talking about the PCs; it's giving the players hints while you're doing it. Even talking about things the PCs missed is bad. You prevent them from ever coming back to that particular setting and having a second shot at figuring something out themselves.

Solution: Remember that, as a GM, your voice in the matter will carry more weight than anyone else's. Even innocent comments may be examined by justifiably paranoid players for hidden meanings. It's better to keep your mouth shut when you don't want the players to catch on to something.

### Oracles

GM: "The kobold porter you hired wants to say something."

Player: "Okay, we stop arguing and listen to him."

GM: "He says, 'Why don't you pour water on the Talking Rock?'"

Player: "Okay, we'll do that."

GM: "Suddenly, you hear a voice that says, 'Good thinking!'"

This method of manipulation is rather common. All NPCs in this sort of game are oracles of wisdom and knowledge, the mouthpieces of the GM. Sometimes, NPCs may make good guesses because they're experienced or smart. But if they do it regularly, the players will start trying to get the GM's hints out of really stupid NPCs.

Solution: Play NPCs according to their intelligence. The dumber they are, the less likely they'll know anything. Even the smartest NPCs should make mistakes. Remember that the three most common responses people make to strange questions are "I don't know," "Haven't the faintest idea," and "Why are you asking *me*, of all people?"

### Giveaway details

GM: "In the hallway, you see some doors. At the end of the corridor is a walnut door with a brass handle."

Player: "What about the other doors? What do they look like?"

GM: "Oh, they just look like doors."

Player: "Gosh, I wonder which door we should go through."

The level of detail with which you describe things may determine where the PCs go and what they do. This isn't the worst mistake you can make, but it's really a problem if you describe a puzzle's solution better than you describe the dead ends. At worst, a GM who does this is willing to describe only the places where the PCs are to go. This is very obnoxious.

Solution: Follow the players' lead as to the detail they want. If the PCs study something, no matter what it is, give lots of details about it; if they aren't paying

attention, don't. Whenever the PCs think they are in danger, whether they really are or not, give out lots of details as if everything were sudden very important. Sometimes give out details even if they are not important, so that players can't tell by your level of abstraction whether a situation is dangerous or not.

### Rifts in the world

The best game world doesn't just have a set of maps, NPCs, and place descriptions. It has a logical view of its world, a set of unwritten rules that gives the world self-consistency. This is the key that allows players to make the willing suspension of disbelief.

Because of this, having a good game world is critical. You might get away with a bad plot or an occasional overmanipulation, but a world must be as real as possible. Otherwise, you'll never have a campaign.

Imagination isn't always necessary. There are published game packs which define different worlds in great detail. But you must be consistent with your world to really bring it to life.

### Unfinished planets

Player: "My barbarian walks into the shop and says, 'Hey, what's new in town?'"

GM: "The shopkeeper says 'Nothing.'"

Player: "Sure. Thongar looks around. What does the shop have for sale?"

GM: "Everything you sold him the last time you were here."

In an incomplete world, no one but the PCs seems to do anything. Nothing ever changes except when the PCs change it. NPCs dully stand around waiting for the PCs to talk to them.

Complete worlds lived independently of the PCs. Actions and events happen whether the PCs are there or not. The players are left with the feeling that their characters are just part of a larger world, and so it becomes more real to them. Running a complete world is the mark of excellence that distinguishes good GMs from mediocre ones. Unfortunately, there just aren't that many complete worlds around.

You don't have to play out hoards of NPC interactions to run a complete world. Just change things a little without the PCs being involved. The shopkeeper's wife gives birth to a son, and the prince orders a bar curfew because of drunken hooligans at night. Make things progress logically. If gold is discovered in the hills, the PCs won't be the only ones going there to look. If armies clash near town, some people will pack up and leave.

**Solution:** Remember that game worlds are living things and change over time. Incorporate prominent characters into the history of the world, keeping a list of current events involving both PCs and NPCs. Put some work into thinking about changes to your game world after each

game session, and keep a calendar of events.

### Basic stupidity

Player: "You know, by your price list, these blast rifles are less expensive than their components."

GM: "So?"

Player: "So, why don't people just buy blast rifles and make money selling them for their components?"

GM: "Uh . . . because, um, because the ultrapowerful weapons makers guild will come around and kill you if you do that."

Player: "Gosh, they sure have that market cornered!"

Everyone makes mistakes when designing a world—even game designers. However, some GMs are too proud to admit mistakes. Instead, they create ever-more-unbelievable justifications for why the world works in a particularly stupid way. Eventually, the entire world looks really stupid to the players.

**Solution:** If players present reasonable arguments about why things should work differently, listen to them. Make changes in the world as early on as possible. (Special tactic: If you're really embarrassed at a particular mistake, just do what game designers do: Say it was a typo.)

### Unbearable silliness

GM: "As you walk down the street, you run into a Denebian slime devil wearing a Mickey Mouse hat and an 'I love New York' T-shirt. He sees your group and slithers over, screaming 'Oh, adventurers! I love adventurers!'"

Player: "We ignore him."

If you are running a parody game, your world can be as silly as you want it to be. But if you're not, don't try to add in silly things as part of a serious world. It won't work. Believe me.

Game worlds that draw from literary sources (e.g. fantasy, science fiction, mysteries, etc.) are best when they are reasonably serious. That's not to say there can't be laughter in the game; it's just that the players shouldn't laugh at the silliness of the world, but at the funny situations that sometimes come up in a serious world.

**Solution:** Whenever you feel the urge to add a bad joke, try to remember the last time someone complimented your sense of humor. If that doesn't humble you, or if by some quirk of fate you really are funny, make your jokes about the world—don't make the world a joke. Don't force the PCs to react seriously to something the players find silly.

### Wild exaggeration

GM: "On the other side of the hill, your barbarian sees the most amazing castle he's ever seen!"

Player: "No problem. He's got this 'incredibly stupendous castle-destroying + 20 sword you gave him last week, so he'll just

cut the castle in two."

GM: "Well, he tries it, but there's a KA-BOOOOOM!!! The sword breaks into a billion fragments!!! The castle is so powerful that even the pieces of that stupendous sword are overawed!!!"

In an exaggerated world, nothing normal ever happens. No barkeep is simply a barkeep; they're all grossly powerful retired wizards. All the non-enemy NPCs are so incredibly tough that they must have been living for at least 200 years to have all the skills they have. Even if the PCs become equally powerful, one wonders just who takes out the trash; it certainly isn't anyone the players have ever seen. Eventually, in an exaggerated world, supposedly stupendous events soon become ho-hum. A GM addicted to exaggeration will combat this by making everything even more huge, powerful, and deadly, which further increases the sense of mediocrity, and so on.

**Solution:** Don't feel like you have to make everything fantastic. Even galactic overlords need to go to the bathroom once in a while. Ask yourself: "Who does all the support work to maintain this marvelous world I've designed?" Play out normal encounters occasionally, so that players get a feel for what the world is like when their character are *not* fighting for their very lives.

### Forgotten bits

GM: "Your dwarven blacksmith says he worships Glazgrok, the orcish god of fire. He was a member of this orcish tribe, and he—"

Player: "Hey, you said last week that no dwarf in your world would have anything to do with orcs."

GM: "Oh. Um, well . . ."

Inconsistent GMs can't make up their mind on how the world should work. Unlike a world run by a *deus ex machina* GM, it isn't that there's no plot, it's just that the GM doesn't write things down so he forgets them. You can make exceptions to things that happen in your world, but be sure to point them out as exceptions.

**Solution:** Think your world through before you run it, so that you don't run into consistency problems. Whenever you describe something new to the players, make sure you have it written down somewhere for future reference, and study your notes before each game.

### Backbone required

Player: "My warrior wants to experiment with some stuff. He randomly picks out some jars of saltpetre, sulfur, and charcoal from the alchemist's shop, and he mixes them together and sets fire to the mess."

GM: "Uh, okay. Um, well, he's invented gunpowder, then."

GMs sometimes let players push their

vision of the world around. This is sometimes okay, but draw the line somewhere. Otherwise, you'll quickly find yourself running a Monty Haul game. Make sure players use only the knowledge their PCs should have. No medieval fighter is going to know how to make gunpowder or suddenly realize that someone stole something of his just because his player hears about it.

**Solution:** Keep tight control over your game world, including the kinds of PCs you allow into it and the things those PCs do that could change the campaign. Try to explore the possible consequences of certain changes, so that you aren't surprised later on. Don't be afraid to reject "perfectly reasonable" PCs, actions, or inventions that either don't fit into the game or will disrupt the balance of power. If something secret is about to happen (like an orc ambush), and you think the players will have their PCs act on this knowledge even if the PCs aren't supposed to know about it, keep the coming event a secret from the players, too. And if someone tries to use player knowledge with his PC, and the result looks like it will cause problems later, just change the expected result into an unexpected one: "Well, when he sets fire to the saltpetre mixture, it fills the room with blue smoke but does nothing else. Funny thing about chemistry in a magical universe—you never know what it's going to do."

### Communication problems

Even if the game world is good and the plots are excellent, you can make mistakes in presenting the game to the players. The players know only what the GM tells them. If the GM doesn't communicate well, it makes it that much harder to play the game. Communication problems often vanish with practice, so if you are a beginning GM, don't get discouraged if everything isn't perfect.

### Lost in space

Player: "Where are we?"  
 GM: "In a starship."  
 Player: "Well, what does it look like?"  
 GM: "A starship."

A nebulous GM never presents any detail in his world. This is one of the worst things a GM can do. Even good scenario packs won't add anything to your game if you read their detailed descriptions to yourself but then say to the players: "Well, you're there." To make a world real to the players, you must describe it to them. Otherwise, they'll never see the world as you do—and they'll get bored and leave the game.

**Solution:** The best designed worlds do no good at all if you don't describe them to the players. If you have trouble thinking of the right words to use, read books and module packs that include detailed and vivid descriptions of people, places, and things. Make sure that your world has a

background worth talking about, or else use a background from an appropriate novel or game aid. You can often read material directly from another source, as long as it's short. While you can over-describe a world (see "Myopic vision"), few people do this.

### Missing the details

GM: "So you get into the room, and there's a chest there. I guess you want to add this to the party treasure?"

All players: "Yes!"

GM: "Hmm . . . seems like there's a trap on that chest. Who exactly touched the chest first?"

All players (pointing at each other): "He did!"

Inappropriate abstraction is much like "Giveaway details." The GM doesn't know when to ask for details on the PCs actions and when not to. Here, the GM errs on the side of not asking for relevant details before he pops a surprise, which leads to lots of arguments later.

**Solution:** Follow all the suggestions from the "Giveaway details" section. Remember to get the information you need (in as subtle a manner as possible) before you act on it.

### Myopic vision

GM: "On the badge, you see a boss of Harold Bluetooth, a famous Viking king, so the badge probably dates from the 9th or 10th century. Harold reigned about ten years before the first invasion of England, when the Danes gathered over five hundred ships and set sail to . . ."

All players: "Zzzzzzz . . ."

This seems to be a rare problem. A GM with game myopia gets sidetracked into giving out details that have nothing to do with the adventure at hand. This GM must learn to wave a *wand of abstraction* and assume that things which are easily done are done (no need to detail every moment of a PC's life, for instance, or exactly how a complex piece of mining equipment works). Don't force players to role-play or understand everything.

**Solution:** Give details only when they have some (even possibly remote) connection to the plot, or if the players are really interested in hearing them.

### Snagged on the rules

Mishandling the rules of a game can cause loads of trouble for everyone. Usually, this problem goes away as a GM gains in experience.

### Simple ignorance

GM: "The crazed tribesman attacks you with a greatsword in each hand."

Player: "Uh, greatswords are two-handed swords. You need two hands to wield them."

GM: "Well, these are one-handed greatswords."

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Player: "One-handed two-handed swords?"

GM: "Okay, okay. I meant, the tribesman has a halberd in each hand."

Player: "No! A halberd is a two-handed weapon, too!"

Before you become a GM, be as familiar as possible with the game's rules. You can change whatever rules you like, but be sure you understand the results of your changes. Don't change the rules just because you don't want to bother looking them up.

**Solution:** Familiarize yourself with a game system before trying to GM it. Ask players who are familiar with the system about obscure rules when you need help finding them.

### Rules or dice worship

GM: "So, agent Dinzl reaches terminal velocity, hits the cement at 400 miles per hour, and dies."

Player: "No, he doesn't. The rules say Dinzl takes 30 dice. But he's got lots of hit points. See here? Page 92, subsection C, paragraph 3, chart M. All I have to do is roll an 18 or better, and Dinzl's okay. See? I did it."

GM: "But that's a crazy rule. Dinzl should be a pancake."

Player: "Hey, those are the rules!"

GM: "Okay, I guess Dinzl lives."

Player: "Fine. Now Dinzl gets up, shoots the guard at the front door, then steals a tank and escapes."

Don't let game rules, die rolls, or player reactions to them push you around. If the rules conflict with the game-world reality you want to portray, then change them with care. Just make sure that you are consistent with your changes, and avoid doing things by whim.

**Solution:** Make sure you feel comfortable with the rules you decide to use, but always inform players of rules changes before they make decisions based on the old "universal laws" —then stick to your guns for consistency's sake. Rules and dice are secondary to the enjoyment you and your players receive in a game.

### Problem personalities

This final category consists of three problems that go beyond the game and extend into real life. As such, even when these problems are pointed out, the GM will almost never change. These problems are described here because many experienced players think they can help new GMs with problems like these—but it isn't possible. These problems go away only when the affected GM gains more emotional maturity. Be prepared to talk about these problems if necessary, but also be prepared to walk away from the game and find another GM.

### Playing favorites

GM: "Jake, your dwarf finds 29 silver pieces. Fred, your wizard gets 12 silver pieces and a jeweled dagger. And sweet-heart . . ."

Player: "Yes, honey?"

GM: "You find the lost sacred artifact of the elven folk!"

Some GMs, often quite unintentionally, let their personal feelings about players influence their decisions in their games. Some players get all the luck—and some get no luck at all. For good or ill, it's a bad way to run a game.

### Bragging and gloating

GM: "Boy, I really fooled you guys this time! That gold mine was empty! Ha, ha! What idiots! Am I smart or what?"

GMs are supposed to be neutral to the PCs' fate. But the kind of GM described here is on a power trip and gets enjoyment from "beating" the players and crowing about it. No player should ever have to put up with an insult like this.

### Supreme arrogance

Player: "Here's my character from Bob's game. Can I bring him into the campaign?"

GM: "This character is so bad, you know what I think of it?"

Player: "What?"

GM: "This!" [tears up character sheet]

Some GMs think that "playing god" extends into the real world. They have the need to always be right or the most powerful. Avoid these people at any cost, and resist the urge to tear them limb from limb. Remember that it's all just a game—and find another GM.



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# Rhyme & REASON

by Scott Roach

## What sphinxes employ, the players enjoy

“ . . . the riddle game was sacred and of immense antiquity and even wicked creatures were afraid to cheat when they played at it.”

*The Hobbit*, J. R. R. Tolkien

Every adventure, on its most basic level, is merely a series of obstacles blocking the characters from attaining their goals. But players will soon become bored if there is not enough variety in the type of challenges with which they are confronted. The scenario in which heroes wade through vast numbers of enemies of every imaginable ilk (as a prelude to the inevitable encounter with some greater malevolent force) works fine the first few hundred times, but then it begins to wear a little thin,

Traps are also useful as a means of testing the mettle of heroes before they reach this final decisive encounter. But it can often be a very tedious business when players are required to specify that their characters are going to poke, prod, smell, dissect, and otherwise examine each object (or NPC, for that matter) they find. Players may also feel cheated if they have taken reasonable precautions but one of their characters still ends up being suddenly killed, wounded or imprisoned. Traps, by their very nature, tend to be capricious and unforgiving.

So what is one to do if he wishes to add some variety to what can often become a rather stale selection of preclimactic adventure filler? Well, how about adding riddles?

### A riddle background

History, mythology and literature are filled with examples of epic confrontations that hinged upon successfully cracking a conundrum. Tolkien's novel, *The Hobbit*, contains action of all types, from natural disasters to interracial warfare, but the one confrontation that most stands out in the collective memories of its readers is one not of arms, but of words: the riddle contest between Bilbo and Gollum. It is one thing to engage in a guessing game as an idle diversion in the safety and comfort of one's own home, but it is quite another entirely when trapped deep within the belly of the earth with a slaving fiend who shall surely devour you at the first incorrect guess.

Riddle contests of a similar sort have

been popular since ancient times. There is an apocryphal legend that claims that Lycerus, the king of Babylon, and Nectanebo, the king of Egypt, once engaged each other in a war of riddles. The "war" was won by Lycerus only with the help of Aesop, the famed writer of fables, who was then residing at the royal court.

On a lighter and more modern note, the film, *Monty Python* and the *Holy Grail*, also borrowed a thread from the rich tapestry that is the history of riddles. Before crossing a chasm, the knights in quest of the Grail were first required to pass a quiz ("Answer me these questions three, ere the other side ye see."). If they failed, they were thrown from the cliff to their deaths. Although most of the questions were relatively easy ("What is your quest? What is your favorite color?" etc.), the indecisive and fickle knights were soon catapulted at great velocity into the chasm. This humorous story has its roots in Greek mythology, where the Sphinx guarded the road just outside Thebes in a virtually identical manner. The humorless Sphinx's quiz consisted of a particularly vexing riddle.

### Riddles in gaming

While it is probably too much to ask that players be expected to make up their own riddles on the spot, there are still many uses for these frustrating enigmas in fantasy games. Of the general uses of conundrums in fantasy role-playing games, the most common is probably as an obstruction between sections of a dungeon or segments of an adventure. There is a certain advantage in occasionally using a riddle for this purpose rather than the usual physical barriers of guards or mechanically held doors. If an area can only be entered by first surmising the obscure meaning of a curiously worded rhyme, the players will find that they are being challenged on a much more personal level than is normally the case. Rather than relying upon cold tables of statistics and the fickle whims of gravity on an oddly shaped die, as occurs when a thief attempts to pick a lock or a fighter batters a door down, the players must depend on their own wits to gain access to these specifically protected areas.

If there are fortune tellers or sages in your present campaign milieu, you might consider having them dispense some of their wisdom in the form of riddles. The oracles of ancient Greece were said to be very fond of this technique, perhaps because if an augury was later proven to be false, the seer could always claim that the meaning of his pronouncement was merely misinterpreted. The amount of "plausible deniability" provided by such a procedure is something that even modern-day politicians would envy. If, on the other hand, a god truly does communicate some type of divine knowledge to his oracles or clerics in the form of riddles, he is likely to be bothered less frequently. His followers must first divine the meaning of his last sending before they will know if any further questions are appropriate, and the less patient or intelligent of the faithful are unlikely to ask any questions at all. Besides, those who figure out the riddle are likely to be smarter than others—and hence better liked and more appreciated by the deity.

1.



A man of a hundred stood out in the cold,  
Exchanged his gay headdress, of colors  
most bold,  
'or one of pure ivory, just now a day old.  
But though freshly dressed, the old man  
stood alone—  
It was his misfortune to live on a wold.

3.



I'm often held, yet rarely touched;  
I'm always wet, yet never rust;  
I'm sometimes wagged and sometimes bit;  
To use me well, you must have wit.

2.



There's someone that I'm always near,  
Yet in the dark I disappear.  
To this one only am I loyal,  
Though in his wake I'm doomed to toil.  
He feels me not (we always touch);  
If I were lost, he'd not lose much.  
And now I come to my surprise,  
For you are he—but who am I?



### Solutions

in your campaign to answer this riddle before they can enter the local guild.  
8. Sailor on a ship. This could be a clue that characters must visit a sailor in order to complete an adventure. The ship's name could be placed in riddle form, too.

ing the first three words: "In the window" This could serve as a clue to a magical candle, a candle signaling device, or a candle that is part of a trap or device.  
6. Chain. This could be a needed item in completing a machine or siege device, or hanging over a pit in a dungeon and climb down it to find a treasure.  
7. Key. You might wish to require thieves

project. Then again, perhaps a gynosphinx is simply using this riddle as an excuse to eat passers-by if they fail to guess it.  
4. Tongue, again. The meaning of the word "row" to which the rhyme refers is an argument or quarrel. This is another favorite of the man-eating gynosphinx, but it could be a hint that the characters must use speech or argument to solve a problem.  
5. Candle. Short riddles like this are often difficult to guess, so you might want to add some other clues, such as emphasis-



Players might also be able to benefit from knowing a puzzle or two of their own. The next time a favorite character is caught in a situation where he is up against a vastly superior (but vain and egotistical) enemy, such as a dragon, perhaps he can barter for his life by challenging the intelligence of this foe with a particularly nasty conundrum. Good game masters are always looking for excuses not to kill characters who have fallen into such sticky situations. This being the case, it has not been unheard of for sympathetic judges to allow even creatures as malevolent and powerful as dragons to become so perplexed or distracted with a difficult poser as to allow their would-be prey to take the initiative and escape. (Remember the tale of Scheherazade and *The Arabian Nights*.) There is, however, an extremely fine line between appealing to a dragon's vanity and offending his sensibilities (i.e., lining the walls of his stomach!).

Another dilemma that often arises in many campaigns occurs when the adventurers come into possession of a new

magical item, such as a wand or a staff. How are they to find the trigger word that allows the item to function? If the characters are of a relatively low level or are very far removed from civilization, they might not have access to the spells or research materials that are required to find the key word or phrase.

However, if the protective case that the wand was found in has a rhyme carved upon it that seems to be of some veiled significance, then the game master has a method of allowing the characters to discern the information that they are searching for without having to give it to them outright. This is particularly effective if the magical device has several scattered pieces that must be found and assembled over the course of many adventures before it can be used (such as a rod of seven parts in the AD&D® game). A separate line of a riddle could be carved into each section. In such a manner, not only would the trigger word be revealed, but by arranging the fragments in a way so as to form a coherent verse, the order

in which the device must be assembled might also be indicated.

These are just a few of the infinite number of ways in which riddles may be incorporated into a fantasy role-playing campaign. The reader is encouraged to use any that appeal to him, or to use his own creativity to come up with applications that he feels are appropriate.

### A riddle sampler

Unfortunately, there does not seem to be any one good source of riddles that lend themselves to use in a fantasy role-playing game. Most books of "riddles" are actually filled with puns (Q: From what country do fish come? A: Finland). Surprisingly, one of the best collections of high-quality riddles turns out to be the aforementioned contest in *The Hobbit*.

The following are some original riddles, provided with answers and suggestions for their use in fantasy games. Good luck solving them!

4.

The only tool which sharper grows  
Whenever used in any row.



5.

In the window she sat weeping.  
And with each tear her life went seeping.

6.



I'm not really more than holes tied to more holes;  
I'm strong as good steel, though not stiff as a pole.

7.

I've little strength but mighty powers;  
I guard small hovels and great towers,  
But if perchance my master leaves,  
He must ensure he safeguards me.



8.

The floor's on top, the roof's beneath,  
And from this place I rarely leave.  
Yet with the passing of each day,  
A new horizon greets my gaze.



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- Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Hobbit*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1966. pages 81-86.
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2. Your shadow. If you want to give the party a warning that they are being followed and watched, or that there is a traitor in the party, then this riddle might be handy. Perhaps the heroes are being followed by the monster-type shadows from the AD&D or D&D® games, too.

3. Tongue. Maybe this is a clue to a secret somatic gesture the characters must give (licking out their tongues), or maybe it refers to a spell or potion component needed to complete a wizard's alchemical

1. Tree. It is late autumn, and snow has just fallen over the brightly colored leaves. Trees, of course, live to a great age and would be a rarity on a grassy plain (i.e., a world). Perhaps a treasure is buried here, or a dungeon entrance is close by, or a creature the characters must meet lives in the tree (perhaps they must meet the tree itself).

Delivered by breath, scares heroes to death: What is it?

**The Answer is ...**

# the Riddle!

by Mark Anthony

*Editor's note: As sometimes happens here at DRAGON® Magazine, we received two articles on the same topic, each of which complemented the other quite well. In this case, the topic was riddles. We hope you enjoy these two perspectives.]*

Alive without breath,  
As cold as death;  
Never thirsty, ever drinking,  
All in mail never clinking.

J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*

Riddles in the dark made for a rather nasty adventure as far as a poor hobbit named Bilbo Baggins was concerned—and they can do the same for player characters in fantasy role-playing games. If your heroes are bored with fighting the same smelly orcs, toss a riddle or two at them. Even the most calloused adventurer will start to sweat when it's "Answer—or else!" (In case you're wondering, the answer to the riddle above, as Gollum well knew, is "fish.")

Riddles and perplexing puzzles of many sorts are a perfect means to liven up an adventure when role-playing has become routine. Unlike tossing in new twists on the same old physical dangers ("Okay, folks, this time it's a plaid dragon!"), riddles provide a new kind of challenge—a mental one—that can restore vigor to a jaundiced campaign. And riddles provide wonderful obstacles for low-level characters who can't go out and fight the big stuff, but who are tired of killing a score of kobolds in order to get twelve copper pieces.

Riddles involve players directly with the action going on. It's not just rolling dice and looking at tables; suddenly it's the players themselves and their own abilities that determine whether or not they'll make it through the adventure, find the treasure, rescue the princess, or even escape with their lives! In this way, riddles add a dimension of reality to an adventure, making the excitement of the situation more vivid in the player's mind, which makes for more creative role-playing.

## The riddles there are

There are many kinds of riddles and puzzles a crafty game master (GM) might use. The most basic sort is the What-Am-I? riddle, a bit of poem or prose that describes some sort of object, place, or event. These riddles generally have one answer and often use vague language and rhyme to beguile the would-be answerer. Bilbo's "fish riddle" is one example. Try this for another:

In daytime I lie pooled about,  
At night I cloak like mist.  
I creep inside shut boxes and  
Inside your tightened fist.  
You see me best when you can't see,  
For I do not exist.



In case you haven't got the answer, here's a different sort of puzzle, but the answer is the same as in the riddle above:

Devils and rogues know nothing else,  
save starlight.

Have you given up, or were they too easy? In either case, the answer is "darkness." The first riddle merely describes the attributes of darkness, though in a rather roundabout way. The second is a word puzzle; take the first letter of every word, and you have it. This one could have been even harder if the letters required rearrangement. I'll explain in more depth later how I made these and other riddles. First, here are a few other types of riddles worth mentioning.

One is the prophecy. This is similar to a What-Am-I? riddle except that it describes a situation that lies sometime in the future. Usually a prophecy cannot be understood until the appropriate time or place has been reached, and it's up to the clever adventurer to realize when the prophecy has been fulfilled and then react accordingly. Say that the great hero Kaladan follows a prophecy spoken over him at his birth by a witch, telling him that he will meet his destiny if he ever reaches a particular place. The prophecy states:

Your doom awaits you in a land  
That treads upon the sea.  
No matter where you turn and stand  
One bearing will there be.  
Here all colors fade to one;  
Unclouded eyes can't see.  
And sideways always runs the sun  
Around your destiny.

One day, our hero journeys far into the northlands of the world, where he travels

over a frozen ocean into the white, blinding land of the eternally setting sun. If he's clever, he will realize that this is the place the prophecy described: the North Pole. (Or did the prophecy mean the South Pole?) If he's not clever—well, let's hope his doom doesn't surprise him too horribly. While they can describe a variety of subjects, all prophecies should have one thing in common: excruciating vagueness! After all, that's what keeps the players on their toes, and it saves the GM from being too exacting in setting up adventures for the future. Note that the hero is not guaranteed to reach his destiny (he might be killed beforehand), and he is certainly not guaranteed to triumph in the end!

A creative GM will use many other sorts of riddles and puzzles to baffle his players as well. Secret messages are a particularly fun method. Perhaps it's a parchment with a hidden message (perhaps a riddle in itself) written in lemon juice. The message is invisible, but when held over a fire (use care when doing this, of course!), the lemon juice darkens, thereby revealing the message. Or perhaps it's a map that, when folded in a special way, reveals an all-new terrain, showing the way to a dungeon entrance. Or maybe the players are forced to solve a mathematical problem, a rebus, or a musical code in which notes are letters. The possibilities are limited only by the GM's imagination and deviousness.

Of course, riddles should be limited to the known abilities of the players. For example, don't use a musical code when no, one in the group knows how to read music. And riddles of the *What Have I Got In My Pocket?* type, though one once worked well for a certain hobbit, are impossible to solve and quite unfair. However, the GM shouldn't hesitate to make riddles varied and difficult. The best riddles are those that are perfectly solvable but only with a goodly amount of creative thinking.

Though riddle types abound, ways in which to use riddles are even more plentiful. Riddles can replace almost any sort of physical barrier in an adventure—particularly monsters and traps—that might hinder characters on their way to the treasure or other goal. And riddles, too, should follow the same rules for placement as both monsters and traps. Riddles in the upper dungeon levels are easier, but deep down where the hoard of gold is hidden, the riddles should become more complex, more difficult, and more deadly if not solved.

To add to the suspense of riddle solving, players should have to discover the answer in real time, not game time. Of course, some riddles are long term. A prophecy, for example, might not be solvable for months or even years of game time, and a riddle-map that leads the way to a dragon's lair need not be solved until the players wish to go there. But other riddles can and should be more immediate; especially when the stakes are high, to

add tension and excitement to the game. It's difficult to be bored when one has just three minutes to answer a djinn's riddle or else become trapped in the creature's bottle. And a GM will never see his players so involved with an adventure as when their favorite high-level characters must solve a puzzle in five minutes or be cast into the depths of the Abyss. Riddle-solving in real time is an experience your players will not soon forget!

Riddles are also perfect for starting off a new adventure. One character may have an ancient map willed to her by a mysterious great uncle. The map leads to a fabled temple. But there's a riddle on the map:

With this ancient map,  
you must find your own way.  
Don't heed the directions;  
they'll lead you astray.  
If first it seems odd,  
then its help will be naught;  
Infinity sideways  
means nothing but ought.  
If you lack direction,  
can you go amiss?  
Perhaps you might wish  
to reflect upon this.

This riddle gives a set of instructions concerning the use of the map. The first couplet lets the readers know something's up. The second tells them to ignore odd numbers and to treat eights ("infinity sideways") as zeros, and the third couplet says that the directions on the map are mirrored. With the riddle solved, the adventurers can be off to find the temple. Solving a mystery or puzzle such as this provides a great motive for the start of a group's adventures and adds an extra dimension to the usual orc-den raid.

Riddles also work particularly well when a group has both beginning and experienced players. Normally, the beginning players will be forced to sit out on the sidelines as the more seasoned players take over the adventure, knowing just which spells their characters must use, when to look for secret doors, and how the GM's mind works. Riddles, however, even 'the score, taking away any advantages an experienced player might have. In fact, with the fresh way of looking at role-playing adventures most new players have, they often tend to be the best riddle-solvers of all! By incorporating riddles into an adventure, the GM can help the beginning player feel like he can actually do something to help the group rather than have his character simply cower at the rear of the marching order. This in turn helps new players to get and stay psyched (as we like to say) about the game.

Working on the same principle, GMs can use riddles to get an unruly campaign back under control. If the players have become too powerful and can kill just about anything sent their way, toss them something they can't shake a sword at—a riddle (or, preferably, lots of them, even a

whole dungeon of riddles!). A holy sword or artifact will be of no avail in the solving of a riddle. The players suddenly have to think for themselves instead of tossing a few dice. Adventure and challenge are back in the game.

Riddles can also liven up a hack-and-slash campaign by providing an alternative to winning by might. GMs can send their players the message that mind really can prevail over muscle; nonwarrior types simply love this. Instead of a squad of skeletal knights guarding the gate of a forbidden city, how about a pair of ponderous bronze gates inscribed with a cryptic riddle? (Don't forget what an interesting time the Fellowship of the Ring had getting through the west gate of Moria!) And, instead of the heroes confronting a powerful wizard and absorbing all the spells he can send their way before hacking him down in his tracks, perhaps an ancient codex spells out another way they can bring about his demise:

Both king and horse have this, of course,  
But you'll want neither of them,  
perforce.

If they're clever, the adventurers will realize that rain (as opposed to the reign of a king and a horse's reins) might be deadly to this particular mage. They might then devise some clever ruse to entrap him in a rain shower rather than simply cutting him to bits.

Riddles don't have to be so straightforward, though. In fact, players can be riddled without even knowing it, if they're not paying attention. Names are a perfect medium for hidden riddles, both those of people and places. One way is to rearrange or reverse the letters of a word or a name, thereby creating a new name (an anagram). For example, a group of characters may just have escaped their worst enemy, Doomfell, when they happen upon a merry merchant named Lom de Lof going their same direction. By the time they realize what "Lom de Lof" spells when the letters are transposed, it may be too late, and Doomfell may have them all!

Name riddles can also reveal something about the place or person that they name. A haggard wanderer called Rex might really be a king. And a band of adventurers searching for the legendary Black Valley may or may not think of anything unusual when they come to a town called Ebonvale. Riddles can be everywhere, limited only by the GM's discretion and imagination. The more riddles of this kind, the richer, more meaningful, and more mysterious the fantasy campaign world becomes.

Riddles also provide a convenient way for the GM to give a group of players some desired piece of information without having to be too obvious about it. One of the characters could come across a strange message carved into a wall by a warrior's dying hand. Another might find a scrap of

parchment with part of a riddle (even better than the whole thing) which could provide a clue to finding a mage's cache. GMs won't have to wrack their brains to come up with ways to introduce riddles into an adventure. After all, they don't require much logic. In fact, the players don't even need to find out just how the riddle got there. That can be another mystery.

### Making them up

No GM should feel intimidated at the task of creating riddles. With a little imagination (which every GM has already) and a few easy steps, thinking up riddles is no more difficult than creating any other part of a role-playing adventure.

One of the first things to remember is that your absolute best friend is a thesaurus. A thesaurus is loaded with plenty of obscure words with which to stump your players. A rhyming dictionary can also be of help if you get stuck when making rhyming riddles. With these two tools by your side, the rest is just thinking up an idea and setting it down.

In creating What-Am-I? riddles, the first step is to think of what you want to riddle about. This sounds awfully basic, but consider your ideas carefully so that the riddle describes precisely what you want to detail. Once you have an object, idea, or concept that you think is describable, interesting, and applicable to the situation

in which it will be used, you're ready to begin. For example, in a riddle I mentioned earlier, I chose darkness as my subject (perfectly suitable for a riddle in some subterranean cavern). The next step was to merely list some of its attributes. In my case, I wrote down:

- covers everything at night;
- shadows in daytime;
- inside things, like boxes;
- see it when eyes are shut; and
- an absence of light, doesn't really exist.

After this step, I was ready to arrange this information in sentences—not a riddle yet, just a descriptive set of lines in an order in which I liked them. I wrote:

- It's in shadows in daytime.
- It covers the world at night.
- It can hide inside things, like a box.
- It can be seen when you shut your eyes.
- It doesn't really exist.

That wouldn't really stump anyone, but now comes the final step. Put the sentences in as vague a language as possible, use obscure words for common ones, and use literary devices like metaphor and analogy (comparisons), puns (plays on words), rhymes, and personification (giving an inanimate object a sense of life). For more information about using any of these devices, consult any standard English writing manual.

In my case, I had the object describe itself in the first person. I also replaced

"being" verbs with "action" verbs; instead of "being" in shadows, I had it "pooled about." In the place of rather ordinary words, I put mysterious sounding ones that also helped to personify darkness, giving it a life of its own; instead of "covers," I used "cloak," and instead of "hide," I used "creep," making it sound more devils. I also stuck in various descriptive phrases such as "cloak like mist" and "inside your tightened fist" purely for sake of rhythm and rhyme.

The end result was an interesting and usable riddle. If this sounds difficult, just try it yourself. To go from plain sentences to riddle-language, simply turn on your "lofty language" circuit (everybody has one) and thumb through your thesaurus. You'll have no problem whatsoever.

Other puzzles and riddles are just as easily created. For a word puzzle, pick a code pattern after you choose your idea. This type of riddle must have a fixed coding system. It can be complex and difficult, but it must be logical and regular in order to be solvable. In the example of this type I gave earlier, I decided to make a sentence in which each word began with a letter from the word "darkness." The next step was to simply think up a set of words that began with those letters. A thesaurus is a great help. Don't worry if the sentence doesn't make complete sense. Riddles are supposed to be cryptic, anyway!

To make the riddle more complex, I could have created a puzzle in which the first letter of each word had to be rearranged to get the answer (an "anagram acronym"). Or the last letter in each word could have been the important one. Or every third word could have been pulled out to form a message. Or the message may have been written backwards. The possibilities are limitless. Remember: No matter how plain and apparent the pattern seems to you, the players have no idea just what type of riddle you've given them. They may try to solve it as a What-Am-I? riddle when the superficial meaning has nothing to do with the answer at all, and it's the hidden code that's important.

Creativeness can yield a multitude of other original puzzle and riddle ideas. A seemingly ordinary message could have a symbol embossed upon it that shows up only with a pencil-rubbing. GMs might buy blank, pre-cut jigsaw puzzles and create their own puzzle maps. A new message may be revealed when a parchment is folded in a certain way. Players will have a great (if sometimes frustrating) time solving any of these and countless other riddles. Having actual physical objects to manipulate brings the game to life in a new way and gives the player a more vivid feel for their character's situation.

Any way they're used, riddles can restore life and excitement to role-playing, putting brand new twists on the same old challenges. So if your players are looking for a little new adventure, the answer is—the riddle!

## Food Fight Erupts in Neighborhood Supermarket

Carrots, broccoli, tomatoes, even brussels sprouts were flying into grocery carts as **The Great American Food Fight Against Cancer** broke out in area supermarkets.

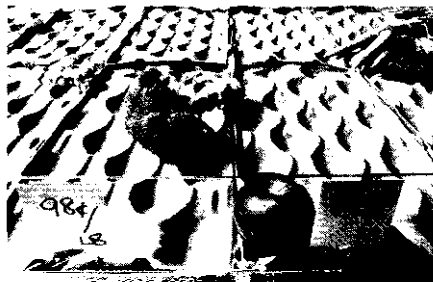
Consumers are reacting to studies which show that foods high in vitamins A and C, high in fiber and low in fat, may help reduce cancer risk.

"My husband is getting whole grain toast tomorrow morning," one shopper declared. A mother was seen throwing carrots into her bag. "Snacks for the kids," she said.

Grocers are, of course, delighted. "This food fight is pretty exciting," said one produce manager, "and there's nothing for me to clean up!"

The American Cancer Society, sponsor of the Food Fight, has more information. Call **1-800-ACS-2345**.

And, be on the lookout for Community Crusade volunteers armed with shopping lists.



Produce section after recent food fight.



Public Service Message



# “If I Ruled the World ...”

Mad scientists,  
megalomaniacs,  
and their  
motives  
in gaming

©1991 by Marcus L. Rowland

He's one of the stock figures of modern-day role-playing games, from espionage to super-hero settings: the would-be world conqueror. This villain has a plan (usually explained at great length to captured heroes), a weapon (often slightly silly), and the ruthlessness (that somehow never extends to killing captured heroes before they escape) needed to seize control. The fact that no one has ever actually managed it is totally irrelevant; our mega-villain is determined to succeed.

It could be argued that the world would be improved by a single centralized government, but a satisfactory form of government needs to be developed first. Maybe the world would have been better off if Napoleon had formed a global empire, but since time machines aren't available, we can't change history to test this idea. With the memory of Hitler still too close for comfort, a diversity of interests and ideas seems a better bet for the future than the whims of a series of dictators.

Most dictators want millions of subjects; it's one of the main attractions of megalomania. Profit and endless luxury are also attractive results of world domination, but there are easier ways of getting rich, and most are a lot safer. A minority want to rule the world for altruistic reasons. Humanity, they argue, can't be trusted with dangerous toys like nuclear weapons and pollutants like toxic wastes, so these must be destroyed or controlled. Other motives for global domination are possible, ranging from political or religious zeal to total insanity and whim, but the first three predominate.

The major global powers have their own plans and goals that may occasionally overlap the topics discussed in this article, but role-playing characters aren't likely to become involved in the high-level activities of these organizations. The governments of the superpowers use long-term political, military, and economic plans, incorporating thousands or millions of elements, rather than the sharply focused activities that constitute the average role-playing game. Dictators prefer smaller and more comprehensible plans that are easier to use in a campaign.

## Resistance is useless

The megalomaniacal approach to world domination concentrates on displays of force, or "Ming The Merciless" methods. A bloodless secret conquest isn't much fun, but a true sense of power comes from flying your invulnerable citadel over New York City, crushing or vaporizing some landmarks, and dropping off a few ultimatums. If you can't be harmed and can destroy anyone or anything that gets in your way, you can do whatever you want. There are many variations on this theme, ranging from orbital lasers and particle beams (cutting the dictator's initials across a convenient desert or jungle, and taking out a few submarines and missile bases in passing) to direct control of the weather.

Megalomaniacs almost always use high-profile schemes for world conquest, impressive efforts involving a maximum of publicity, gigantic high-tech machines, and hordes of uniformed flunkies. Even if their scheme revolves around a weapon the size of a bread box, they'll probably put it inside a gigantic fortress that just screams that it's a secret base. This is the villains' main weakness. Hundreds of would-be dictators in film, television, and comic books have been unable to resist explaining their plans in gloating detail, and the dictator's control panel (with a conveniently large Destruct switch) is *always* within easy reach of one hero's fingers.

## Why conquer the world?

Global conquest for profit looks a little pointless, since the resources needed for any realistic plan of conquest imply immense wealth to begin with. Unfortunately, wealthy people aren't immune to greed, so someone who was already rich might still be tempted to try for complete control of world finances. A more plausible possibility is the idea that corporations might gradually usurp the role of national governments in the major states, as they once controlled the "banana republics." After all, at least one Western government seems happy to hand over many responsibilities to commercial organizations. Corporate states seem a logical extension of this idea.

Conquest could benefit the megacorporations in many ways. Effective control of governments would allow them to change laws to protect their immense wealth and divert global resources into profitable channels. This doesn't necessarily mean channels that help the public, since lots of profitable activities are useless or dangerous. For example, the arms race would probably continue, though the dictators would hopefully ensure that nuclear weapons were never actually used. Pollution might continue, since there doesn't seem to be much profit in stopping it unless it gets in the way of productivity.

A profit-based system would probably have a very low profile, and the public might be wholly unaware of its secret rulers; manipulation behind the scenes is a good deal safer than an open operation and is more in keeping with the shadowy world of international finance. Does anyone really know who controls the world's wealth? It's interesting to note that the most plausible plan for global conquest I've ever seen could only be mounted by one multinational company; of course, there are those who would claim that IBM already rules the world, but that may be a little far-fetched. Other industrial giants also have interesting potential; orbital mind-control lasers are probably still science fiction, but the Muzak Corporation should have its own satellite transmitters before the end of the century, and it can openly claim that its product is effective in manipulating human behavior.

So far, I've only mentioned legitimate business, but any sufficiently large criminal organization is essentially a corporation. Criminal business tactics and corporate politics tend to be a little more lethal than legal ones, but the eventual results are much the same. A criminal dictatorship would probably need to put up a respectable front, so the casual observer would notice little real difference between a corporate dictatorship and a crime-syndicate takeover.

It's easy to imagine a world ruled by big business, and this background is used in many science-fiction stories. The period in which national governments lose control to these corporations could be an interesting setting for many game systems. Don't expect to have a meaningful discussion with the elite under corporate rule; middle management will handle all tedious details, such as overthrowing governments, hiring hit men, and the like.

## You're in good hands

Genuinely altruistic dictators are rare, but anyone arrogant enough to want to conquer the world might believe that the world will benefit from his rule. In some cases, this goal is the main motive for conquest.

One simple way to impose your utopian view is to ensure that no one else is around to stop you. This is the "cruel to be kind" approach used by villains in some James Bond films: kill off most of the human race, making sure that a few hand-picked sympathizers are around to pick up the pieces afterward. A truly benevolent dictator won't find this solution acceptable and may try less direct methods. Tricking humanity into doing what you want is possibly easier to justify than the use of force. One idea that has appeared several times is world unification against the threat of invasion from space; faking this convincingly can't be easy, but might just be possible with the right technology behind you. The snag is that this method doesn't leave the potential dictator in an obvious position to assume power, unless the dictator happens to be the Secretary-General of the United Nations. A sufficiently cunning scheme might make the victims cooperate with their conqueror, but any failure would probably ensure that the planned effect was never achieved.

Altruistic dictators are usually obsessive personalities; they are convinced of the rightness of their cause, but feel guilty about and will try to explain and justify their actions. They will reveal their plans, but they'll usually wait until it is too late for anyone to intervene.

## We have the technology

So far, we've talked about motives for conquering the world. What about methods? Let's define "the world." For the sake of argument, a dictator wants some or all of the following:

- 1: Control of the physical planet Earth.
- 2: Control of the biosphere (plants, animals, etc.)
- 3: Control of the human population and human resources.

The most obvious way of achieving Objective #1 is by starting a nuclear war. The villain and a few trusty henchmen and henchwomen simply hide out in space, underwater, or a really deep bomb shelter, then wait for the ruins to stop glowing in the dark. There are a few obvious drawbacks, such as the fact that any base on or near Earth is statistically likely to be near a nuclear explosion. Then there's the possibility of triggering a nuclear winter or global flooding, destroying the ozone layer, and so on. Of course, the smoldering charnel heap our dictator inherits isn't good for much, but someone like Hitler might regard that as an acceptable price for global supremacy. If any game master is contemplating this idea for his next adventure, please note that several dozen healthy men and women are needed for a stable gene pool; a smaller population develops inbreeding problems.

Biological warfare seems the best way to achieve Objective #2 (and presumably #1, by default). In practice, though, the logistics of simultaneously killing everyone on Earth are daunting. Immediately lethal viruses sound good in theory, but a fast-developing disease tends to kill off victims before they can spread it very far. The ideal germ warfare virus has the following properties:

A: The victim is apparently healthy but highly infectious for a few days before the terminal stages.

B: The people who "launch" the virus can be protected against it, perhaps by vaccination.

C: Mortality (or any other desired effects) should approach 100%.

All this sounds plausible, but the safe use of biological weapons poses immense problems. Viruses have a habit of mutating, and the immunity of their users isn't always assured. On the other hand, some of the intended victims may happen to be naturally immune, and others may not suffer the full effects of the disease. There's also a risk of triggering a nuclear war, since the nuclear powers would probably assume that their enemies had spread the disease. Launch crews tend to be isolated in aircraft, submarines, or deep shelters, and they would learn about a plague long before it affected them.

Objective #3 is undoubtedly the most appealing but is also the hardest to achieve. This is the realm of diplomacy, propaganda, and blackmail. The main requirement is a threat so terrible that no government or individual is likely to attempt to stand in your way. A demonstrable ability to destroy the world is a good start, but has the drawback of being somewhat final; what's really needed is a controllable threat, a weapon that's unstoppable but has a finite effect. De-



Artwork by Thomas Baxa



stroying Mars, New York, or the mayor of Bugtussle, Arkansas, by a method that potentially allows you to destroy the world is a better idea than producing an ultimate doomsday weapon and waiting for someone to call your bluff. Beam weapons fit the bill nicely, but the orbital stations needed to use them may be a bit vulnerable. If nuclear weapons are used, a preannounced detonation at a fairly unimportant site may be the best bet, with a promise that there are plenty more bombs available if necessary. The drawback is that the major governments have lived with the threat of nuclear war for several decades, and they may not easily be impressed by a loud bang (they might also retaliate).

Biological weapons are more difficult to demonstrate; there's no real way to show that they are unstoppable without releasing them. A compromise solution might be the use of a less dangerous disease, with some distinctive effect that is easy to predict. For example, if you sent an ultimatum warning that the weak version of your mutant anthrax would make everyone's hair fall out, then released it and caused an unstoppable plague of baldness, major governments might take your threats more seriously.

If blackmail doesn't appeal, how about brainwashing and other psychological tricks? Subliminal TV and radio messages have often been suggested in this role, but there doesn't seem to be much evidence that they work particularly well, and months of saturation coverage would be needed to ensure that everyone was affected. There's another problem in that most research suggests that these techniques will only work on target groups that share a common language and cultural background. Global brainwashing doesn't look very likely. Perhaps brainwashing would work if these methods were accompanied by other techniques. Several drugs are known to heighten suggestibility or reduce intelligence. One nasty possibility is use of a disease that makes the victim's body synthesize such drugs, without any other major harmful effects, accompanied by an intense media blitz. Some authors have even suggested that sophisticated biological research may be able to come up with a disease that programs the victim's personality directly by interfering with memory RNA. The snag here is that there is no real evidence that any two individuals store memory information in exactly the same way.

Deception techniques may be another route to control of the human race, possibly accompanied by some or all of the brainwashing methods mentioned. All of these schemes would probably be preferred by commercial or altruistic dictators; megalomaniacs would probably find that they worked too slowly to satisfy their desires. These methods are also extremely expensive—and, speaking of financing . . .

## Money is wonderful

Conquering the world is phenomenally expensive, unless you can come up with a plan that finances itself. Equipment may be stolen, but items like bases and personnel cost money. This gives commercial organizations a real advantage; they already possess many of the resources needed for any major operation, from production facilities and warehouses to transport and laboratories. THRUSH, the villainous organization in *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* TV series, was a particularly good example of a dictatorial organization that hid behind commercial fronts and got a lot of its income from legitimate activities. One episode even showed how retired middle-management personnel were murdered to avoid paying their pensions. SPECTRE, in the James Bond novels, and WEB, in TSR's TOP SECRET/S.I.™ game, also use legitimate commercial organizations as cover.

Governments are even more useful as sources of seed capital and as cover for covert activities. They have good reasons to maintain prisons, army bases, and other useful facilities. Control of at least one government is a useful step in any plot to achieve global supremacy.

All of this sounds difficult to achieve, but anyone who stands any chance of conquering the world shouldn't find it hard to organize a take-over bid or a small military coup. Today Consolidated Coconuts Inc.; tomorrow the Republic of Jibrovia; next week, the world!

## Home sweet home

Every conqueror needs a base, and really elaborate schemes probably require several. It may be possible to start a plan for global conquest in your garden shed, but there could be a few problems if you wanted to install a cyclotron or a shuttle launch facility. These things are also extremely difficult to hide; current satellite technology is able to track objects as small as a cigarette pack or garden hose under ideal conditions, and they can probably spot major installations despite camouflage and bad weather. Earth resource satellites may even be able to detect large underground or underwater structures. Fortunately for potential dictators, it takes a lot of time to analyze satellite data, and events in an apparently unimportant area may simply be overlooked. This can't always be counted on, though. One futuristic spy novel written in the 1960s and set in the 1980s picked a then-ideal isolated area where no one would be likely to notice a large base and several hundred mercenaries; a quarter-century later, Afghanistan doesn't seem a particularly good choice. The rapid expansion of global tourism could also cause a few problems. It's hard to imagine any isolated location that isn't threatened by hordes of adventurous sightseers.

When I began this article, I intended to include detailed plans for an elaborate

base, equipped with everything from interrogation rooms and laboratories to waterbeds filled with piranha. However, there are hundreds of examples on television, in books and in films, so it would really be a waste of space. Designing a base is fun, and you can find examples of almost anything you want, if you look at enough sources. Need an inaccessible castle? Try *Where Eagles Dare*, *Dance of the Vampires*, or *Madame Sin*. Do you need a polar fortress? Take your pick from *Doc Savage*, *Superman*, or *The Watchmen*. Feel like owning a space station? The James Bond film, *Moonraker*, has a splendidly silly example, and there's always the Death Star if you're thinking really big. There are also many role-playing scenarios and adventures built around these structures, described in much more detail than could ever be put into a magazine article.

In designing a base for a role-playing scenario, remember to think big, flashy, and high tech. Computers should be vast metal cabinets with hundreds of flashing lights and whirring tapes, not anonymous gray boxes. There should be lots of impressive signs; "DANGER: 20,000 VOLTS" and "ACHTUNG! MINEN!" are reliable standbys, but don't neglect radiation and biohazard symbols, or eloquent messages like "TRESPASSERS WILL BE SHOT!" Naturally any base should have a good supply of sadistic prison guards, mercenaries, mad scientists, beautiful "foils" (a term borrowed from the Victory Games' JAMES BOND 007\* game), and other interesting NPCs.

It's important to realize that bases should look impregnable, but they must have a few loopholes for game play. Player characters need to be able to enter them and save the world, so remember to leave a few weak points. For example, a mine field might be laid so badly that any explosion sets off a chain reaction that leaves a clear path through the field. Guards might be lazy, inattentive, or easily bribed, and might carry large bunches of interesting keys. Passes and uniforms might be forged or stolen. If you bear these points in mind and design your base for excitement rather than lethality, your players should enjoy having their heroes deal with it.

## A cunning plan

Finally, here are some sample dictators and details of their motives, methods, resources, and chances of success, plus adventuring ideas involving them.

### Outback Overlord

**Dictator:** The Reverend Matilda Braithwaite

**Motive:** Altruistic lunatic

**Method:** Mind control

**Resources:** 2,300 followers, \$5 million, TV station

Mrs. Braithwaite is an Australian TV evangelist, the leader of an obscure fundamentalist sect, who believes that the world would be much nicer if she ran it. She hasn't yet decided exactly how she will

run the world if she does take control, but she's sure that a right-thinking person like herself will do a better job than hundreds of professional politicians and diplomats.

One of her followers has developed a new psychotropic drug that drains willpower and makes the victim abnormally susceptible to suggestion. It is effective in microgram doses. Mrs. Braithwaite persuaded him to manufacture enough of the drug to blanket the local water reservoir, and she is now in complete control of Wombat's Crossing (population 2,300), the New South Wales town where she is based. As yet, the Australian government hasn't noticed any abnormality; a sleepy town has merely gotten sleepier. As more of the drug is synthesized, Mrs. Braithwaite plans to extend her rule to neighboring areas, then further afield as she takes control of more chemical factories.

Mrs. Braithwaite's plan is effective in an isolated area because her domain has little contact with the outside world. There is only one local TV station (hers), and the town isn't linked to the satellite network yet, so her broadcasts are the main influence on victims of the drug. In any larger town, the victims would be bombarded by TV and other media influences from dozens of sources, so her chances of retaining control would be slim. Since she isn't a particularly good administrator, conditions in the territory she controls will worsen before too long, eventually attracting government attention.

Adventurers should encounter her, perhaps accidentally, soon after she takes control of Wombat's Crossing. The townspeople will behave like passive zombies under Mrs. Braithwaite's direction, but they may overcome the adventurers by sheer weight of numbers if the adventurers threaten her. Try to ensure that at least one adventurer falls victim to the drug and the TV station. This should not be a particularly lethal adventure.

### Lost—and Found

**Dictator:** President Kamshalla Motubo

**Motive:** Profit

**Method:** Nuclear blackmail

**Resources:** Small African nation, four nuclear warheads

Three months ago a Chinese submarine accidentally launched a live missile with four MIRV warheads. Fortunately, they weren't armed; unfortunately, the self-destruct system didn't work, and the missile landed in a swamp near Motubo's capital. The army dug it out and took the warheads to an isolated jungle base. Now, Motubo is trying to find a weapons expert who will be able to arm the bombs.

Motubo intends to hold a few Western capitals for ransom, use the money to buy a better presidential palace and some more warheads, then start the cycle again. He doesn't want to control the world; he just wants to milk it for enough cash to ensure a permanently luxurious lifestyle.

There's one major flaw in this plan: The

Chinese government knows that Motubo has the warheads but isn't sure of their current location. Chinese agents would be a little conspicuous in an African country, so the Chinese government is recruiting a reliable mercenary force to recover the bombs.

Characters can be involved in this adventure as Chinese agents, as mercenaries, as Western agents trying to find out what the Chinese are doing, as criminals trying to steal the bombs from Motubo, or as counterintelligence agents looking for the bombs after Motubo's agents have planted them. They might also be called in to find a nuclear physicist who has been kidnapped to arm the bombs. This should be an extremely dangerous mission in which player characters stand a real chance of being wounded or killed.

### A Pox Upon You

**Dictator:** Doctor John Dressler

**Motive:** Megalomania

**Method:** Biological warfare

**Resources:** University laboratory

Doctor Dressler was a brilliant virologist who devoted much of his life's work to the fight against smallpox. When the World Health Organization decided that the disease was finally eradicated, his university decided to economize by cutting funds for some of Dressler's projects. Dressler believed that he was on the verge of discoveries that would (at least) earn him the Nobel prize and might lead to cures for dozens of diseases. The sudden loss of funds forced him to stop his work and triggered his latent insanity. If the world doesn't want to be cured, Dressler has decided to make everyone suffer instead.

Unknown to the university authorities, Dressler retained a supply of live smallpox virus and has spent years developing new and more virulent bioengineered forms that will not respond to traditional vaccines. Dressler intends to release the disease at London Airport, wait until a global pandemic has started, then announce that he has a vaccine that will be available if the governments of the world agree to his terms. His terms amount to immediate and absolute control of all United Nations activity, as well as progressive control of the world's national governments. The vaccine and all documents describing its manufacture are locked in his laboratory, in a booby-trapped safe packed with explosives. Any attempt to overpower him or force the safe open will result in destruction of the material. Once Dressler has started to take the reins of power, he will reveal that there are several strains of the virus, with different incubation periods. Each requires a separate vaccine, and he will only release them as his demands are met.

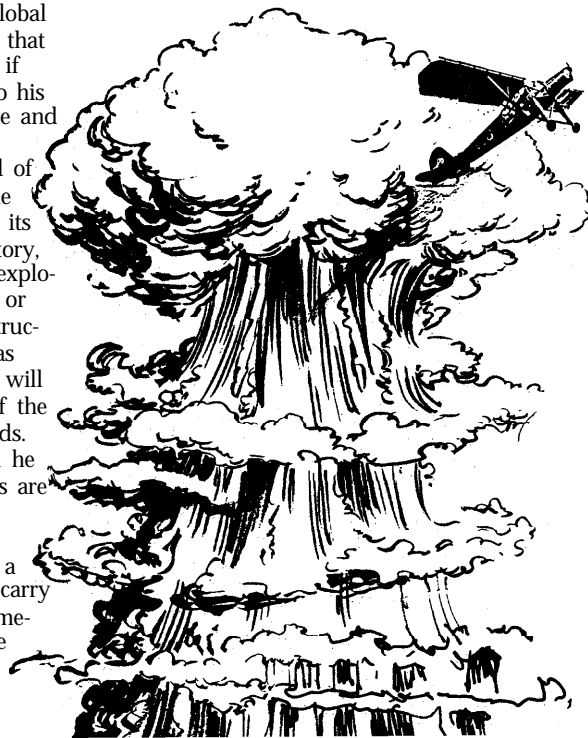
Dressler is an extremely dangerous opponent. He isn't initially backed by a large organization, but he can really carry out his threats. Adventurers must somehow overcome him without losing the

vaccines or his notes. He is quite capable of letting a few million people die to prove that he means what he says. If he can take control, he'll start to act out grotesque power fantasies, starting with a ceremonial execution of his "enemies," such as the financial controllers of his university.

### Acknowledgements

The title of this article was suggested by a song from the musical, *Pickwick*. I would like to thank Roger Robinson, John Dallman, Terry Pratchett, and other friends for their ideas on this theme. Brief suggestions (in no particular order) for further reading and viewing on this topic include: *War In 2080* and *The Space Eater*, by Dave Langford; *The Assassination Bureau Ltd.*, by Jack London; *W. G. Grace's Last Case*, by William Rushton; *The Great Wash*, by Gerald Kersh; *The Watchmen*, by Alan Moore; *The Iron Dream*, by Norman Spinrad; *The White Plague*, by Frank Herbert; *To Howard Hughes: A Modest Proposal*, by Joe Haldeman; *Down The Programmed Rabbit Hole*, by Anthony Haden-Guest; *Underkill*, by James White; *Love Sickness*, by Geoff Ryman; *Mind-killer*, by Spider Robinson; and *The Satan Rug*, by Alistair MacLean. The movies *Superman III*, *Madame Sin*, and *Rollerball* are also recommended, and almost all the James Bond films feature plans to conquer the world or elaborate secret bases. Role-playing material of interest includes: *Operation: Starfire*, for TSR's TOP SECRET/S.I. game; *Villains*, for Victory Games' JAMES BOND 007 game; and *Zombietown U.S.A.*, for Steve Jackson Games' GURPS\* system. Ω

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# "You again!"

by Scott Sheffield

Artwork by L. A. Williams

## Enemies who never go away – and how to create them

Grub the gnome nervously eyed the glass case, focusing his thoughts on the tutelage he'd received at the local thieves' guild. He recalled stern Wesley drilling him on the intricacies of finding and removing traps. Grub bent low over the case to examine it, then smiled. "There it is," he said in hushed tones, spotting the tripwire leading to the magical canister beneath the case.

The short thief's fingers worked quickly to defuse the poison-gas trap. A minute

later, he straightened with a sigh, a palm-sized gem in hand. The job done, Grub turned and hurried to the open window, pausing momentarily to survey the dark street below. Deciding it was safe to descend, he swung out onto the ledge and deftly climbed down to the narrow alley. Seconds later, he had disappeared into the misty streets of Sombrialil.

What happens next? In many AD&D® campaigns, this encounter would earn the

successful rogue some gold and a few experience points, and nothing more. In a different campaign, however, the theft would have earned Grub much, much more. It would have earned the player-character thief a nonplayer-character nemesis.

### The recurrent NPC

Dungeon Masters who wish to add depth to their fantasy campaigns should consider making use of recurring NPCs. In a campaign that utilizes recurrent figures, the DM and his cast of colorful NPCs would not be content to let Grub off the hook. While the victim of a burglary might let the culprit go, it is more likely that the victim will use whatever magical and mundane resources he has at his disposal to track down his light-fingered visitor, like so:

The bald-headed high priest smoothed his crimson robes and waited for word from the sorcerer bent low over the crystal ball. "I have found him, master," whispered the mage at last. "He walks the streets of this very city. I even recognize the stall keeper with whom he now haggles."

"Excellent," replied the bald cleric, a broad smile crossing his weathered face. "Keep an eye on him. I want to know everything our little friend does." As he left, the priest thought, *I shall personally teach him that stealing from the Cult of the Thirteenth Circle is at best unwise, if not fatal.*

When a PC interacts with a DM's world, that interaction should reflect the reality that deeds don't go unnoticed. By using this notion of action/reaction, the DM can build a more believable and exciting adventuring environment. A well-run interactive campaign makes use of recurring figures to add both a dash of reality and a sense of continuity.



Recurring NPCs can be used to start new adventures or to link unconnected adventures together. A foe met first at the Pit of Despair shows up by surprise at the next city in the PCs' journeys. Coincidence? That's for the DM to decide, but the simple presence of that foe will serve to bind together the two settings and will lend the game world an air of connectedness.

Not only will the players begin to view their world as one that evolves and changes in response to their PCs' behavior, but they will also be motivated to role-play. If hack-and-slash play has enduring consequences, players learn that it is wise to review the alternatives before rushing headlong into the fray. Success then depends on the ability of players to be creative, rather than how many hit points their PCs have. Play becomes more interesting for all participants, DM and players alike.

### Acquiring a nemesis

How is it that the PCs come to be the foe of a recurrent NPC figure? In the example here, the PC gnomish thief named Grub precipitated the relationship— it was his actions that began the bald cult leader's involvement in the thief's affairs.

A different scenario is quite possible. In the course of play, the PCs might stumble onto an NPC plot. A party that inadvertently meddles with an organization's plans to depose the current ruler will earn that group's enmity as well as the ruler's praise. In this way, PCs can incite the wrath of a vast number of NPCs.

Recurrent NPCs need not all be arch-villains out to kill the PCs. The rivalry doesn't even have to be deadly to be interesting. Jealousy, pride, competition, and the desire for revenge can fuel the relationship. Some among your cast of recurring foes can merely trip up, annoy, or embarrass the PCs.

Perhaps the NPC who turns out to be a recurrent foe is a competitor. Every time the PCs attempt to retrieve a lost artifact or endeavor to defend the honor of a lady, the NPC shows up first and denies the PCs the glory. Think of the scene early in the movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, in which Indiana Jones loses the idol he's retrieved from the death-trap tomb to another collector of antiquities. Do you recall the line, "Once again, Dr. Jones, what was briefly yours is now mine"?

If the PCs are adventuring in a city, the potential cast of recurring "foes" is vast. The captain of the city guard might take a special interest in them, imagining them likely candidates for stirring up trouble, and he will always have them followed by guardsmen. An unscrupulous tax collector might decide to relieve them of their excess gold whenever they return from adventuring. The local thieves' guild could even tell its apprentice thieves to practice their skills by lifting items from the unsuspecting PCs.

As the DM, you needn't limit your cast of recurrent NPCs to humans or human-

oids. There are many intelligent creatures that can be used as nemeses. There is only one caveat to remember: If you intend to use a monster on an ongoing basis, choose one that is not restricted to a particular locale. A monster that cannot leave a swampy environment will not be as versatile a foe as one able to function anywhere the PCs can.

### Creating the NPC

Not all recurring NPCs need to be fully developed prior to their introduction into play. In some cases, the DM may reuse an NPC initially intended to be used only once in the campaign. Perhaps the NPC turned out to be memorable in some unexpected way, and the DM fancies using her again. There is nothing that prevents the DM from doing so, but before the NPC is reintroduced, time should be taken to flesh her out.

When designing an NPC for use on a recurring basis, the DM should try to give her some element of distinctiveness. A unique speech pattern, a style of dress, a particular gait or some mannerism peculiar to the individual is essential. Perhaps the NPC speaks with a lisp, has bushy eyebrows, and a broken nose. Or maybe she dresses in foreign garb or has an accent.

The selection of readily recognizable NPC traits shouldn't be haphazard. The DM should pick characteristics for the NPC that fit with the NPC's psychological

makeup and background. For instance, the individual who dresses in foreign garb may be a trader who deals in rare herbs and spends long periods in foreign lands. Being thus engaged, she's adopted the style of dress from another part of the campaign world.

Careful design of the NPC can give the PCs clues about the true nature of their foe. It will start the players thinking and prompt them to see their nemesis as more than just a cardboard character. Habits peculiar to an NPC can help the players gauge their foes. Maybe she coughs nervously or is forever scanning the vicinity, eyes darting to and fro. Perhaps she nervously strokes a feathered amulet whenever threatened with harm or grins broadly at the mention of hostilities.

What the DM should aim for in selecting quirks and physical characteristics is an NPC that is memorable. When the NPC next appears, the DM need only describe the identifying trait to elicit immediate recognition. If the DM uses miniatures in the course of play, it's suggested that the same miniature be used to represent that NPC whenever she makes an appearance. In time, just the placement of the miniature on the gaming surface will elicit groans and a flurry of action as the players scramble to meet the challenge.

DMs should also spend time developing a background for the nemesis. Whether the NPC was raised on the filthy streets of Gligthor and spent her childhood barely



surviving or instead was the daughter of a stuffy, deprived baron from the Duchy of Ultinsad will influence her perspectives, motivations, disposition, and general behavioral patterns.

For example, whereas the NPC with the cut-purse background would likely favor utilizing poison or an alley encounter to even the score with a PC rival, the baron's daughter might use her political connections to have the PCs arrested and detained in the cells of a castle in her uncle's duchy.

Having a background for the nemesis can make the DM's task of character portrayal easier. When the DM must decide how the nemesis reacts in a given situation, he can base the decision on what his own choice would be if he had the same background as the NPC. A consistent portrayal contributes to the believability of the nemesis and permits the players to identify with their foe more readily.

Before unleashing the recurring NPC it's also good to work out some of the NPC's connections. What organizations or religious group does she belong to? Who owes her favors? To whom does she owe debts? Are the authorities interested in her activities? NPCs, not unlike well-played PCs, should make use of whatever special connections they have. For instance, an NPC nemesis who belongs to a local thieves' guild may have the PCs tailed and their

conversations lip-read.

Any constraints on the NPC should also be considered when the DM portrays the nemesis. An NPC who is wanted in half-a-dozen realms for sundry misdeeds will prefer not to make his presence known and will opt to deal with the PCs in a way that preserves his secrecy. How a nemesis deals with PCs will be greatly influenced by that NPC's circumstances.

### Sweet revenge

Once the background and connections of the recurrent NPC have been developed, the next step is to decide how the nemesis will seek vengeance. The NPC may choose to confront the PCs or take a more subtle or devious route.

Direct retribution would include attempts to physically attack the PCs. If the DM has decided that the NPC is craven, the nemesis may have someone else combat the PCs, but he will watch and hurl insults as the hired thugs engage them. On the other hand, if the nemesis is a noble, a member of the PC party may be called out to match blades with him.

The marking or maiming of a PC by an NPC enemy is another possible form of revenge. The fictional figure Zorro was famous for slashing a Z-shape onto his opponents. Instead of using a Zorro-style rapier, the foe might use a branding iron or mark the PCs with a magical symbol.

This particular type of revenge serves to knock the PCs down a peg or two and assaults their pride. It also fosters animosity and competition between the NPC and the PCs, and prompts the PCs to seek vengeance of their own. If that happens, great! You'll know you've really got your players involved and played the nemesis well.

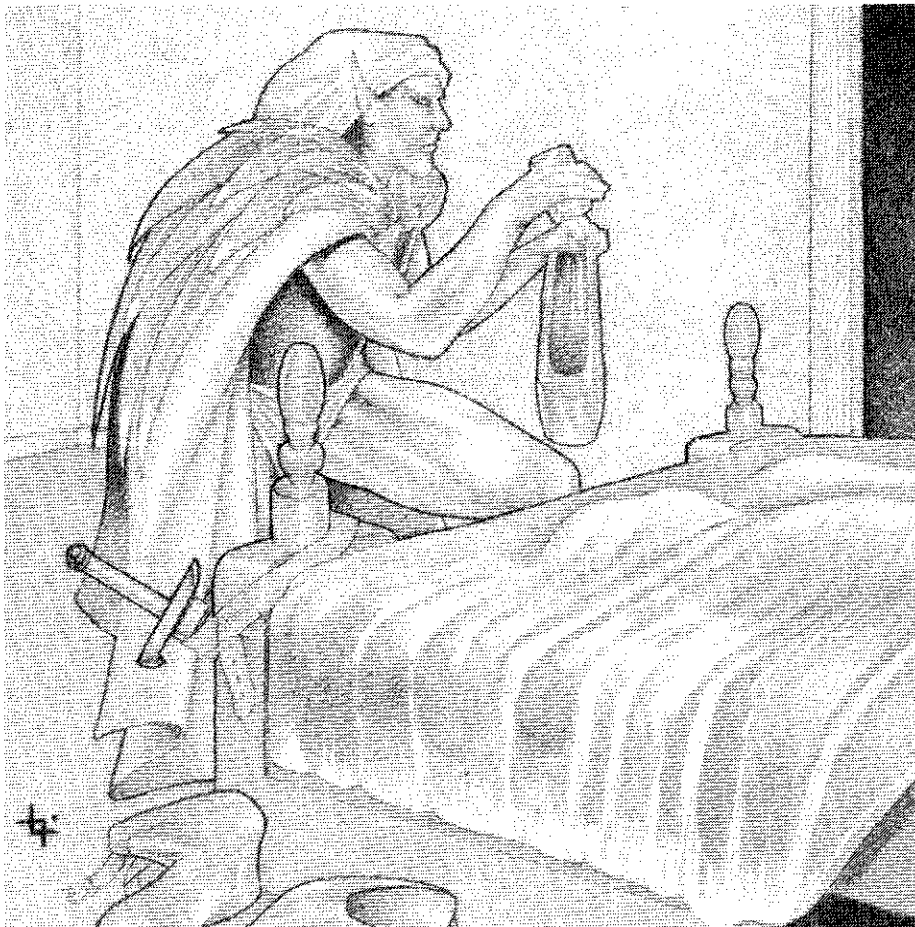
Generally, indirect forms of revenge are better suited to the more intellectual and calculating members of the DM's cast of NPCs. For these connivers, embarrassment of the PCs is an effective and popular revenge. The NPC might dig into a PC's past and reveal illegitimate heirs or inappropriate lovers. The NPC might also fabricate tales about the PCs that have no factual basis and spin them with an eye to discrediting them. The character assassination might, for instance, involve allegations of cheating at cards or tax fraud. A resourceful nemesis might frame PCs for the commission of a crime, contriving to have it look as if the PCs murdered someone, stole something, or plotted an overthrow of the king.

The type of revenge sought should depend both on the nature of the relationship between the nemesis and the PCs, and the personality of the NPC. For example:

Erimus the Black had watched the gnome known as Grub for two weeks. Tonight, Erimus would do as the cult-master had bid him do. With infinite stealth, the black-clad master thief slipped into Grub's bedchamber and retrieved the stolen gem from the satchel at the foot of the bed. Without a sound, Erimus took from his own pouch a royal seal that he'd stolen that same night and put it inside Grub's satchel. By morning, the royal guard would receive information implicating Grub as the thief, and a "witness" would emerge to testify to having seen Grub running from the royal treasury. By midday, Grub would be before the courts, his hours numbered.

In this example, the bald-headed priestly superior directed Erimus to achieve revenge in a way that would preserve the Cult of the Thirteenth Circle's secrecy and keep the authorities from inquiring into the doings of their clandestine organization. Because the magical gem was necessary for the ritual that would summon their extraplanar lord to the Prime Material plane, the cult needed it back. The bald priest got immense pleasure from the thought that Grub might be convicted for a crime that he didn't commit, instead of for a crime that couldn't be revealed.

The NPC's form of revenge should also be guided by the disposition, background, and character classes of the PCs. Nemesis will seek to find out where the PCs' vulnerable spots are, then strike where the PCs are most tender. If the player who runs Aethelward the paladin portrays him



as morally upright to a fault, the NPC might elect to besmirch the paladin's reputation. The NPC could spread rumors that Lady Emiline, wife of the local duke, is pregnant with Aethelward's child! Or he could leave "evidence" indicating that Aethelward used magical enchantments to cheat at last spring's joust. Whatever type of vengeance is chosen, remember to tailor it to suit both the PC it is aimed at and the NPC from whom it originates.

### Keeping tension high

A recurrent NPC should serve as a constant and unpredictable element in play. The key is to maintain an aura of anticipation. Individual DMs will come up with their own techniques to keep up the suspense, but here are a couple of options to get you started. You may want to drop misleading hints to indicate the "presence" of a nemesis. Mistaken identity encounters should be kept to a minimum but keep PCs on their toes, like so:

Grub and his adventuring companions are strolling in the royal gardens when they notice a bald-headed man slip around a corner ahead. Grub and his friends quickly draw weapons and ready spells, intent on doing away with their bald priestly foe. Rounding the corner, they skid to a stop in front of a frail, open-mouthed gardener who is definitely not their elusive bald foe.

The liberal use of red herrings tossed into the mix keeps the PCs guessing and maintains the sense of an impending encounter. Curious goings-on can be used to give the appearance that there is method behind the madness the PCs experience. For example:

The four puzzled companions sat at a table mulling over the events of the previous three days. Caine, a cleric of the Morning God, pointed out that the barrel that fell from the supplier's shop the day before had missed Grub by only inches. "And then this morning," Cain said, growing excited, "after that cat walked by us, we were attacked by those cultists! In the name of the Sun, I'd almost swear that cat was a wizard's familiar."

"Then there was that merchant in the market who started yelling about me owing him money. No doubt he was paid to do that so no one would give us lodgings in this forsaken city," added Porthos, a fellow adventurer.

"Perhaps our bald-headed nemesis is up to his old ways," interjected Aethelward. "I wish Grub had never stolen that gem and gotten us mixed up with this Thirteen Circles gang."

Will Derkellian, the party mage, leaned back in his chair and turned the ring on his finger. "Then again, perhaps it's all just coincidence, and you're just jumping at shadows," he commented, a barely hidden smile playing at his thin lips.

During the course of play, PCs invariably suffer various misfortunes. Given time, players might attribute their unfortunate circumstances to the fiendish machinations of their slippery NPC foes. Sometimes their suppositions may indeed be correct, while at other times they may be wildly inaccurate. If a player incorrectly concludes that the party's nemesis is behind the PCs' misfortunes, you as the DM shouldn't disabuse the player of the notion. Instead, permit the players to draw their own conclusions, and have fun.

If the players' inferences are erroneous but nevertheless intriguing, a nimble DM can modify the story line in that direction. Done well, this enriches play as players start to see the adventuring environment as a living world where happenings are not a collection of random encounters without meaning or connection.

Whatever technique is used to keep the players guessing, the DM should aim for a state of mild paranoia. Players will become more embroiled if they perceive their nemesis as a real and continuing threat to their characters' well-being. To achieve this anticipatory atmosphere, the DM must periodically remind the party that their unseen nemesis remains behind the curtain of the campaign stage, waiting for the DM's cue to reappear.

If the tension is to be kept up, it's also essential that the nemesis keep the PCs

off-balance. To, do that, the DM should have some advantage over the PCs, be it financial, magical, or informational. This difference in capacities, whatever its form, should remain throughout play. Essentially, this means that parallel development of the NPC must take place.

As PCs advance in levels and gain magic and money, so, too, should the nemesis. If the PCs began adventuring as 1st-level characters and have risen to 4th level, then the foe who was 3rd level to start should now be 5th or 6th level. The nemesis' advancement should be roughly equal to that of the PCs in terms of experience points, but the NPC-PC level difference may shrink over time. If the nemesis is to remain a challenge and a threat, his constant and continuous growth is necessary.

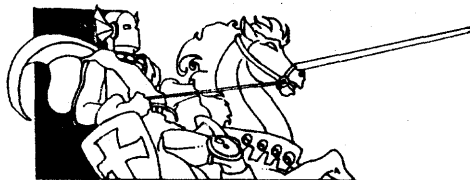
### Keeping the NPC alive

It is the nature of nemesis that they must return. The initial encounter between PCs and their soon-to-be nemesis will in some sense be indistinguishable from any other encounter. On the second collision, both parties may begin to develop feelings toward each other, perhaps animosity or curiosity. When the NPC and the PCs come together in the third and subsequent encounters, it is likely that the PCs will begin to either dread or eagerly anticipate the arrival of their elusive opponent.

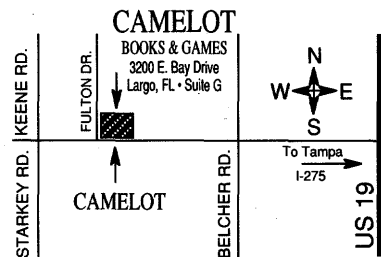
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How, though, does the DM manage to keep a nemesis in the campaign when the PCs are doing their best to remove him from play? There are a number of solutions to the dilemma. The most basic is flight. The foe could simply disappear from the scene whenever things look threatening. The easiest way for him to leave is by fleetness of foot, but in a magical world he has many other options for extracting himself from seemingly hopeless situations. Potions, oils, scrolls, and sundry magical devices can be used to beat a hasty and enchanted retreat.

While whisking NPCs out of harms way may frustrate the PCs to no end, it serves two valuable purposes: It will keep the NPC alive to do battle again, and it will also build the relationship between the elusive foe and your campaign's adventuring group.

At times, given overwhelming opposition or unfortunate circumstances, it may be appropriate to have the NPC foe "die." Even if this happens, the DM is not precluded from using him in future game sessions; his death could have been avoided by any number of means. (This is the "obscure death" option presented in the DRAGONLANCE® saga modules for the AD&D game.) For instance, the nemesis might have used a timely illusion to dupe the PCs into believing that the game was up. Even if the death isn't illusory, it need not be final. A truly dead nemesis might be resurrected by a loyal companion. This possibility should be used sparingly, though. Keep in mind that **resurrection** and **raise dead** spells are very costly and ought to be restricted to NPCs of wealthy background or those who have connections in religious organizations.

There is another entirely different solution available to DMs who are using monstrous nemeses. Keep in mind that for some creatures, destruction of their "body" is inconsequential. The destruction of a powerful extraplanar being's Prime Material form does not entail its final demise. While being barred from returning to the Prime Material plane for a time, the entity is not without means of evening the score. Such a "dead" foe could prove to be a continuing source of annoyance to the PCs. Minions on the Prime Material plane could be instructed to seek out the PCs and deliver retribution. Even worse, the minions might be instructed to bring the PCs to the being's home plane for a personal reckoning.

If you like running adventures with numerous plot twists, you might consider the following scenario for keeping a nemesis in the picture: PCs who slay a "nemesis" may be chagrined to realize that the persistent NPC was merely the stooge of a more powerful and equally persistent master. The clever puppeteer may have set the stage to lead the PCs to believe it was the vanquished underling who ran the show. Just how many hierarchical layers are interposed between the PCs and their

ultimate foe is for the DM to decide.

Then there is the classic vendetta. Family or friends of the recently departed could take it upon themselves to avenge the death of the recurring NPC. This eventuality is guaranteed to confuse and befuddle the PCs. A total stranger may appear one day and unleash a *lightning bolt* at the party for no apparent reason. If the PCs survive, they will be faced with the task of discovering why the mysterious robed figure hurled the spell their way. A DM might even wish to make the bolt-hurling stranger into a recurrent NPC foe in his own right.

If the DM has ruled out resurrection and concluded that no associate would ever seek vengeance on behalf of the nemesis, then there exists one last alternative. Such a friendless nemesis can rise of his own accord as a member of the undead legions, possibly as a revenant or an evil undead creature like a wraith. The shock value of facing the NPC again will be heightened if the PCs believe that they have faced their foe for the last time. . . .

Skalderskien the half-ogre leaned down and clapped his short companion on the back. "Did ya see de rocks fall on dat bald guy?" he grunted happily. "We got fm good dis time, eh?"

"Yes, indeed," sighed Grub in relief. "Old Baldie won't shadow us any longer now that our rock slide did him in. He should be flatter than a buckwheat cake." The companions left the area in high spirits, returning north to the city.

That night, however, a pallid, bloody form stirred beneath the rocks and debris. Slowly, the being that was once an arrogant and powerful high priest shook off its rocky tomb and arose, its shattered body mending in horrific fashion as its sunken eyes turned in the direction of those who had slain it. It slowly nodded. Undead power coursing through its limbs, the being started north.

As the DMs cast of recurrent NPC foes swells, care should be taken to select from the different modes of keeping the NPC in play. Using the same bag of tricks becomes tedious. When the alternatives presented here have all been used, be creative and design some of your own.

### Ending the relationship

There will, no doubt, come a time when a favorite recurrent NPC has become (banish the thought) boring. When the reaction of your players upon seeing their nemesis reappear is no longer "What? You again? Well get you this time!" but instead is more like an "Oh, him again! What else is new?" response, then perhaps it's time to retire that particular recurrent NPC.

The retirement need not be permanent, but sometimes it's best that it is. Recurrent foes should engage the interest of the PCs, challenging and intriguing them. Letting go might be like losing an old friend but,

as all good DMs know, the next adventure will bring new foes— and among those foes there just might be another embryonic nemesis waiting to spring on the PCs.

### Final thoughts

Although this article has been written with a particular bent toward fantasy adventuring, it can be readily adapted for use in other genres. The basic notions can be applied to horror, science-fiction, or super-hero gaming. No matter what type of game system you run, the creative use of recurrent NPCs will add to the enjoyment of role playing. After all, there is nothing like meeting an old foe . . . except perhaps beating him once and for all!

*With thanks to the University gamers and Spike Y. Jones.*

Ω

## Letters

*Continued from page 5*

*The next time that the doctors let you have a copy of DRAGON issue #181, with Robin Wood's wonderful cover depiction of a wizard's laboratory, look carefully at the toothless skull to the far left center of the cover (this only works with the American cover, as the British cover was heavily cropped). Look at the spot where the lower jaw connects with the skull. Now, move to the left about one-eighth of an inch, to the half-hidden thing in the darkness under the scroll. Hah! Isn't that incredible? They were right there the whole time! I love being a sadis— um, an editor. Actually, the only reason I know where they are is because two fellow TSR employees became frustrated with the search themselves and called the upstairs art director who called the artist and got the answer. I'm glad you enjoyed our little game.*

## Wild dice revisited

Dear Mr. Moore,

I really enjoyed Michael J. D'Alfonso's article, "The Wild, Wild World of Dice" [in issue #182]. Many of my gaming buddies have some of those weird habits, too. My favorite dice story is one that a good friend told me. He was DMing an AD&D® adventure for a single player. When the player's characters were badly injured in a surprise attack, the player became excited and yelled "Fire seeds!" [for one of his characters' attacks]. He then grabbed up all the dice and threw them across the room to illustrate.

Joel Patton  
Travelers Rest SC

*The only weird dice story I recall comes from the habit of one gamer I knew who put dice in his mouth and spit them out on the table when he had to roll them. Needless to say, no one ever stole his dice.*

Ω

# The Referee's Code of Honor

by John Setzer

Artwork by Joseph Pillsbury



## Six simple ways to earn players' trust

Any AD&D® game DM™ must be trusted by his players if he is to run a successful role-playing game. It is almost impossible to run a game if the players always whine that you cheated on a die roll or were too tough on them with your choice of monsters and adventure tasks. Players must trust the DM so that he has the freedom to take on special situations that call for role-playing, not just roll-playing.

There are several things that a DM can do to earn this sought-after trust. What follows are six guidelines for DMs to follow that will insure that they are as fair to the players as possible.

1. *Always treat your players with respect.* This may sound simple, but it is not always that easy. I've seen DMs who actually chastise players for allegedly not being smart enough to figure out a puzzle, or who even yell at them and stop the game when the players do something that the DM believes wasn't very bright. It should go without saying that you should treat your players as human beings. Remember: They are not really fierce fighters, brilliant mages, and crafty thieves; they are students and workers and husbands and wives. They play as best they can, but sometimes they may take actions that their characters likely wouldn't. If they do something wrong, let them find out through the play of the game itself. Don't sigh heavily, roll your eyes, and close the module. That is out of context of the game and will only serve to embarrass those who made the mistake.

Think of the times when you screwed up; did the more-experienced players yell at you, or shake their heads and mutter? ("John, John, John, what are you doing? This is not the time to use that spell. You should save it for when we come across something more powerful.") Remember



that feeling; it is all the worse when a DM does that to a player. Some players will be very embarrassed and may become quiet and unsure of themselves for the rest of the game. Others will be irritated, taking a hostile stance and bringing about the “players vs. DM” syndrome. This is to be avoided at all costs. Role-playing success depends on the entire group—the DM included—working together. The DM “wins” when the players have fun.

Instead of taking out your frustrations on a player (“How could they be so dumb as to miss that? Now the whole adventure is messed up!”), think about what you, the DM, did wrong. You are the players’ eyes, ears, and everything else; you are their only link to the game world. Perhaps you were a bit unclear in giving the long, drawn-out monologue the priest gave at the beginning of the mission; the players might have been bored because you were just reading some speech you wrote earlier. Next time, role-play the speech. Let the players interrupt and ask questions, instead of saying, “Wait till the end to ask questions,” then sticking your nose down into the text—which is, of course, behind the DM’s screen. Players will know by the impassioned speech of the NPC when not to say anything. Maybe, too, the puzzle you laid out had too few clues, or the clues you did lay were too obscure for the players to figure out. The clues might refer to a passage in an ancient text, for example, that you feel the characters would know about, but unless you provide the information beforehand, the players will miss it.

2. *Never take a character away from a player.* There are two instances in which many DMs will take a character away from a player: magical control of some sort, and death. In the case of the former (*charms*, possession, and the like), the DM must remember that the character and not the player is controlled by the spell. Whenever possible, let the players role-play through the situation (e.g., the NPC mage gives commands to the player character). This is one of the most tricky situations for a player; it takes a good role-player to correctly play an other-controlled character. The player must have a knowledge of the spell or power in use, including guidelines and restrictions for both the controller and person being controlled. For example, a player whose character has been *charmed* should know that if the PC is commanded to kill himself, he would not do it and would have a chance to break the spell then and there. Sometimes, a brief explanation to the player (in the form of a note, usually) on the specifics of a spell in relation to a character’s reactions is necessary.

As far as death is concerned, the control I am talking about is related to the dice. Characters should not die because of roll of the dice alone. Give characters a chance to role-play out a life-and-death situations.

For example, I have seen in published modules certain cursed items that immediately kill their users without a saving throw (*cloaks of poisonousness* come to mind). Instead, try to help the player make a decision based on role-playing. Consider the difference in these two examples:

DM: “You see a statue of a werewolf. The statue wears a real cloak.”

Player, figuring the real cloak on a statue must mean something: “I take the cloak and put it on.”

DM: “Your character dies, no save.”

DM: “You see a statue of a man, but the man has been twisted somehow into the form of a wolfman. His face is contorted in an angry snarl, but his eyes belie a deep sense of pain. A black cloak is draped on the terrible statue, hanging limply in contrast to the motion of the statue. You feel a knot form in the pit of your stomach as you gaze upon the horrible sight.”

Player: “The cloak is real? I try to examine the cloak.”

DM: “How are you examining the cloak? Do you touch it in any way? Where are you touching it? Do you touch the clasp? Do you touch the statue at all?” The DM may even drape a coat over a chair at this point and say, “Show me exactly what you are doing.”

All of this gives the player more information about the cloak. It is not just a piece of cloth on a statue; it is a black cloak on a horrible stone figure, and a sense of dread tweaks at the character’s innards. Doing this gives a player more choices in deciding his character’s actions; he knows something is not right, but is it because of the cloak or the statue? He can proceed from here. It is his decision; the risks have been well presented.

One note about giving details: It is very easy for a DM to manipulate players by portraying things in a certain way. In the previous example, instead of the DM hinting the cloak had a backdrop of dread, he could have given the player the opposite impression: “The cloak is draped majestically on the powerful back of the creature, lending an impressive quality to the statue.” A description along these lines makes the cloak seem desirable, emphasizing power (which many characters crave). So, if the DM wanted the PC to try the cloak on and get killed, he could steer him in that direction while still having an air of innocence. (“Well, he took the cloak, so it’s his fault. It wasn’t like I fudged a roll or something to kill him.”) Be careful that you give fair descriptions that do not deceive characters. Such deception will only make the players overly suspicious of you, and you will lose their trust.

3. *Don’t take on more than you can handle.* DMs who are unprepared or who aren’t good at improvisation can run into this problem very easily, but in truth it can

jump up on any DM who has big plans for a campaign. The DM may initially provide a couple of hints at something, and the players bite at the bait. Then the DM leads the players on a bit more, but the players are really getting into the DM’s “stuff.”

They get going too quickly, wanting to go on ahead faster than the DM can keep up, and he makes up something that goes too far; perhaps it leads to a war or a conflict with a campaign fixture, maybe even an encounter with a deity.

Let me give you an example of something that happened to me. Throughout one campaign, I had characters catch glimpses of a creation of mine, the “great orc” (based on Tolkien’s Uruk-hai). The PCs would be on their way from one town to the next, and I would occasionally let them encounter a couple of great orcs in the woods at night. It soon became an obsession; the players figured that every new adventure had to do with these orcs. I let this go on for awhile, enjoying the effect it had on the group. Then, once they finally killed one, they examined it very closely. They decided that they needed to get to the bottom of this mystery. I had not figured on this, that they would jump in this quickly dropping everything else, but I succumbed to the players’ wishes (they were so excited).

For the rest of the night, I DM’d off the top of my head. Everyone had a great time but, as the players delved further into the mystery, I let myself go too far. I wove in a particular rumor that had been going around about a powerful being controlling many of the goblinoid tribes in the area. Through stealth, one character found the lair and went deep into it. He overheard some of the denizens discussing their plans to start an organized takeover of the local village to carve out their own orc nation. Their leader was discovered to be an illithid. The character went back and told the rest of the group. In the next few sessions, they continued to infiltrate the place and gain more and more information. All was going well, until it became time for the actual war.

What had I done? I didn’t want a war! But one night of wild improvisation had started one. The characters had seen the lair, the troops, and the equipment. There was a massive underground complex, deep in the earth. Now I had to resolve this. The players weren’t interested in playing the war out with the BATTLESYSTEM™ rules. I could have just said that the war had taken place and this is what happened, but I wasn’t prepared to deal with the aftermath. The world would be forever changed; many of my designed adventures would be ruined as those areas were hit by the war. Nations would maybe even be realigned if the monster army had any success; even if they didn’t, certainly many cities and towns would be changed or destroyed. I could have worked through this, but I was overwhelmed by the task. To top it off, I really didn’t have the time to

deal with it. The campaign soon died off.

What I had done was take on a grand task without thinking first what it would entail. This is where reality comes into play. None of us can afford to spend entire weeks of time on our hobby; we have work, school, families, friends, and other outside commitments. Don't take on something before thinking how much time it will entail. This means sitting down and putting on paper what needs to be done and how long it will take. Be careful when playing improvised games that you do not do something that you will regret later.

4. *Be reliable outside the game.* If you want to be trusted during the game, you must be trustworthy outside of it. Don't say that you can play Sunday afternoon when you know you have a paper and a major test to deal with on Monday. You may find that you didn't get it done that week and will need to spend time on Sunday studying and writing (especially if you're a big-time procrastinator). It's not fair to the players to cancel at the last minute; they've probably reserved this time for the game and could have been doing something else had you told them sooner that you couldn't make it.

Players have a concept of you as a person. It is rare to be perceived in two entirely different ways by people who know you; the players will have difficulty trust-

ing your word during a game if your word is worth little outside of the game.

5. *Make the game fun for the players and yourself.* There are as many types of players as there are types of people. No matter how you may categorize a player, each one is still unique. One thing that all players share, however, whether they are problem-solvers or role-players, is the desire to have fun. That is the primary reason they play the game. How do you know if the players are having fun? The best gauge is if they still play in your game. Players will let you know they are not having fun by not coming to your game. If the players always come away from the game having enjoyed themselves, they will trust the DM in most situations because they know that the DM will make that situation fun to play. Conversely, if the players do not always have a good time or don't get some satisfaction from every game, they will protest many bad situations that get thrust upon them because they fear that this will be another one of the DM's "drags." They just don't trust the DM to make this fun for them.

You, the DM, should be having fun too! You are not there to be a tool to provide amusement only for the players. Do some things that you'd like to try in your game. If the players are predominantly hack-and-slashers, provide them with action but

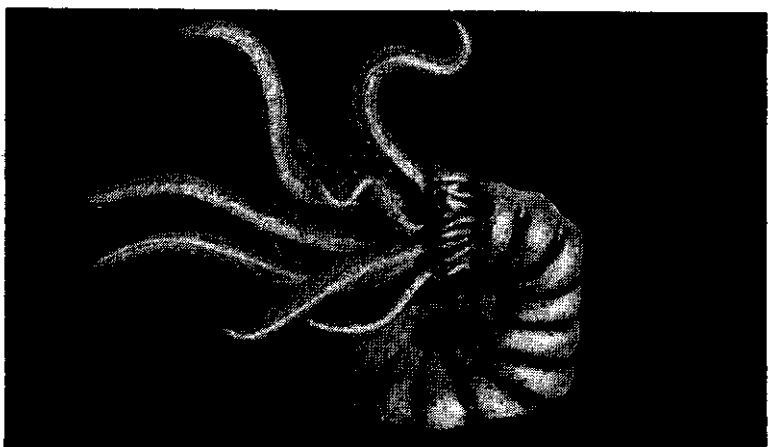
make sure that you allow periods of NPC interaction if you like to role-play. Variety is the spice of the game. Players may even begin to enjoy the role-playing part more than combat if you role-play well.

6. *Take pride in your work and also in the group.* DMs have to do a lot of work, but they also have the opportunity to be proud of what they do. Writing an excellent adventure that challenged the PCs to their limits, playing that necromancer NPC so well that the mere mention of his name causes heroes to look over their shoulders, even getting all of the mundane things done to prepare for a game (experience updates from the last adventure, setting up props and music, getting the food ready, etc.) are all things that a DM should be proud of. While a group effort is needed to really have a fun evening of role-playing, most of the responsibility lies on the shoulders of the DM. The best ones gladly take that responsibility, and they pride themselves on a job well done. This also extends to the group as well. If you have a good group of players, you should realize that you are at least in part responsible for that. When a younger player begins to show gaming maturity, you can be proud that you had a lot to do with bringing enjoyment to that person. Ω

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A game campaign's NPCs should be nasty—just as nasty as the PCs

# Give Your Villains a

# Fighting Chance

by Kevin Troy

Artwork by  
Lissanne Lake

Are you, as a game DM™, faced with a group of rules lawyers for players? Do you feel your campaign is slowly succumbing to the “Monty Haul Syndrome”? Are players breezing through your most difficult adventures, and do they play shallow characters created simply to hoard magic and gold? Do they exploit the sheer size of the revised D&D® 2nd Edition games by buying rulebooks you don't have? Fear no more! With this article, you'll learn how to give your campaign's monsters and NPCs a fighting chance—without being unrealistic or unfair.

## Know your sources

The simplest way to toughen up your adventures without being unfair or unrealistic is to know all the rules you are playing with. Optional rules, new spells, magical items, and monsters should all be known to you. This may seem obvious, but I for one know the benefits of buying all the optional rulebooks (such as the Complete Handbooks or sets specialized to one setting) and convincing the DM to play with those rules. Many a DM has fallen to heart-rendering ideas for a wood-elf ranger with the berserker kit. Don't let the play-



ers use their knowledge against you!

If buying optional rules is too expensive for you, look in used-book stores or the used-materials section of a mail-order catalog. If this doesn't work, borrow the book from the player using it against you. Take a week or so to familiarize yourself with it, then borrow it again whenever you think you may need it (for instance, when you're creating an adventure).

If worst comes to worst, tell your players that those optional rules are not being used in your campaign. Nothing hurts a pampered player more than creating a 1st-level character using Method I (3d6 straight) and only the core rules in the hardbound manuals.

If you do get the optional rulebooks, use them just as much as the players do. Don't make that Red Wizard of Thay a wimp—give him class! Barbarian chieftains should not be mere 5th-level fighters, they should be 5th-level berserkers with weapon specialization. The same goes for campaigns using the AD&D 1st Edition game. If you are using the classic older modules, update them using *Unearthed Arcana* rules (new spells and weapon specialization rules being the most important).

Go through your modules and check for weaknesses in those NPCs with character classes. For example, here are the elite guards at the temple of Bane in Zhentil Keep, as described in the AD&D module

*Curse of the Azure Bonds* on page 56:

6th-level fighters (18): AC 4; MV 6"; HD 6; hp 45; #AT 1; Dmg 1-8 (long sword); AL LE; THAC0 15.

Get real! Many 3rd-level adventuring fighters are outfitted better than that. Let's assume that any warrior that gets up to 1st-level is going to specialize (here, with the long sword). Then, too, a 6th-level fighter (not to mention the temple of Bane itself) is probably wealthy. Give the guards plate mail armor (which by itself is AC 3, better protection than chain mail and a shield) and exceptional quality weapons from the *Complete Fighter's Handbook*, page 10 (these add one point each to THAC0 and damage). Missile weapons would be appropriate as well: either a light crossbow with 20 bolts or a long bow and 20 sheaf arrows per fighter.

Also, one should allow for the benefits described in the "Combat Rules" chapter of the *Complete Fighter's Handbook*. Most useful of these are the weapon-style specializations. In the above case, I would give the guards either the single-weapon style with two proficiency slots devoted to it (thus gaining a +2 bonus to their armor classes as opposed to the one from a shield—see page 62) or two-weapon style with ambidexterity (thus giving an extra attack per round—see page 64). I favor the latter, as the guards' armor classes are already each one better from the armor

boost we gave them. Besides, these guards will presumably serve in an offensive capacity (and a +2 bonus to armor class on a short-lived guard is not as beneficial as an extra attack per round) and they already have good life spans in combat because of their above-average hit points.

Here are the same fighters, now greatly improved:

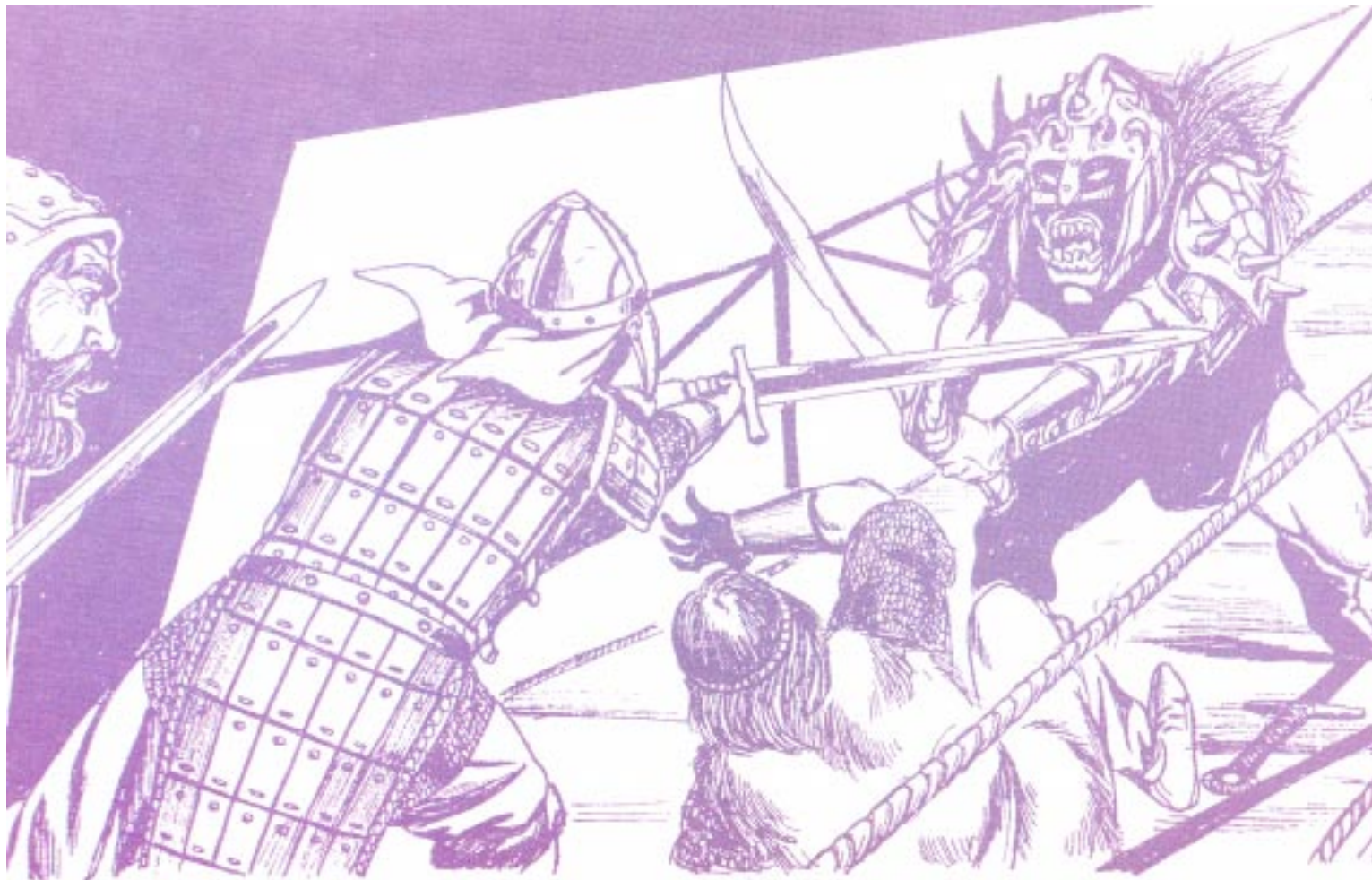
6th-level fighters (18): AC 3; MV 6"; HD 6; hp 45 each; #AT 5/2; Dmg 1d8+2 (long sword) or 1d8 (bows); SA paired swords (weapon spec.), missile weapons (sheaf arrows); SD none; AL LE; THAC0 13.

One note about exceptional quality weapons: While they improve your NPCs by far, they are hardly worth the PCs' time and effort to carry them around. Chances are that a 5th-level character already has a better (i.e., magical) weapon, and toting an extra long sword around all day is hardly worth the encumbrance.

### Managing magic

Magic deserves beefing up as well. If you get a rules manual that has an awesome new megadeath spell in it, change your NPC's spell book to make room for it. The same goes for a devious new use for an old spell (see Joel E. Roosa's article "Creative Casting" in *DRAGON*® issue #169 and the *Complete Wizard's Handbook*, pages 82-86, for examples.)

For example, if you are running a



FORGOTTEN REALMS® campaign, you may wish to replace *Melf's acid arrow* in most NPC spell lists with the superior spell *Agannazar's scorcher*, from the *FORGOTTEN REALMS Adventures* hard-bound. Whereas the first spell affects one target, requires a to-hit roll, and splits its damage over several rounds (doing 2d4 hp damage each round), the second spell does 3d6 hp damage per round for two rounds with no save and an automatic hit. *Agannazar's scorcher* can also catch others in the jet (for less damage, however). The only real benefit in the short run (which matters most in combat) to *Melf's acid arrow* is the range benefit (180 yards to a puny 20 yards).

When it comes to NPC spell memorization, use common sense. If the characters stormed the first level of a wizard's dungeon yesterday, the wizard will most likely be prepared with a few more offensive spells than usual. However, if the wizard knows that the characters have some type of fire-resistance spell or magical item, he will not memorize *fireball*. Any wizard or priest worth his spell components will set *alarm* spells, *glyphs of warding*, and, in the case of the very powerful individuals, a few nasty magical traps using *contingency* or a *guards and wards* spell. Finally, if a mage doesn't want to destroy his precious tower with mass destruction spells, he won't use *lightning*

*bolt* unless necessary. Take the motives of NPCs into mind.

### Expand your horizons

Another simple idea for beefing up NPCs and monsters is to use "weird" or rare magical items and monsters. *DRAGON* Magazine is a great source of both. The various *Monstrous Compendium* appendices are useful, too, if your players don't have them. (Many of those monsters are so rare no one would ever memorize them all anyway.) Other good monster sources are the AD&D 1st Edition monster books. The *FIEND FOLIO*® and *Monster Manual II* books have some great monsters that were never carried over into the AD&D 2nd Edition game. (The "fiend" nobles aren't the only monsters worth retrieving, either. Try using a drelb from *Monster Manual II* on a party of characters who are afraid of wraiths, or a frogemoth on a boating expedition.)

Don't tell your players what an item or monster really is when they find it. Read the tips on running *RAVENLOFT*® campaigns in "The Techniques of Terror" chapter in the *RAVENLOFT* boxed set's rulebook. See also Gary Coppa's article, "It's Sort of Like a Wand . . ." in *DRAGON* issue #161, and "The Game Wizards" column by Bruce Nesmith in *DRAGON* issue #162. One famous example of this "no information" style can be found in the

fantasy novel, *The Sword of Shannara*, by Terry Brooks. Early on, the heroes find the fabled Sword of Shannara but don't even realize what it is until it is stolen by the enemy!

Make your monsters smart enough to fight on their own ground. Real kobolds don't fight in large, open fields at high noon. Real kobolds fight in passages about 3' high with no light and plenty of booby traps. This means the players don't spot the kobolds until the latter are about 30' away (the typical range of torches and light spells), but the PCs are fully aware of the kobolds, thanks to the arrows and traps all around. A fine example of this point can be found in the AD&D module, "Tallow's Deep," by Steve Gilbert and Bill Slavicsek in *DUNGEON*® Adventures issue #18. Here, goblins have built up a truly deadly dungeon of their own. Note that *DUNGEON* Adventures' modules are often rife with wonderful new magical items and monsters to spring to your unsuspecting players.

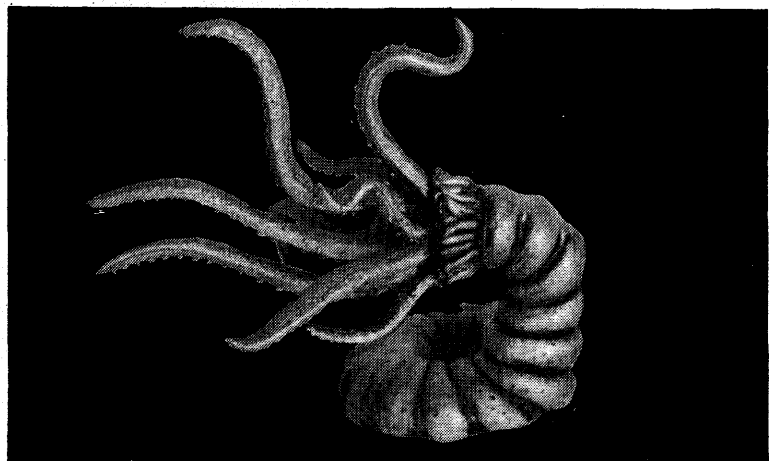
### Conclusion

The key to deadly (but by all means fair) DMing in AD&D® games can be summed up like this: Have the NPCs and monsters use the same rules and nifty tricks, tactics, and plays that the player characters use. You want to make the PCs—and players—sweat. ☺

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# TROUBLESHOOTING YOUR GAME

by Tanith Tyrr

Artwork by Scott Rosema

## Constructive ways to deal with disruptive role-players

"Dungeon Master, may I play my 30th-level berserker-necromancer-assassin-high priest? His scores are all 20s except for his charisma, which is only 19, and his strength, which is 25. He gets nine attacks every three rounds because he's ambidextrous. He wields Stormbringer in his right hand, Mjolnir in his left hand, and he has two wands of Orcus. . . ."

If you have run AD&D® or other fantasy role-playing games (FRPGs) for any length of time, this litany probably sounds familiar. Almost every DUNGEON MASTER™ has encountered the player whose characters all belong in the *Legends & Lore* tome rather than in the campaign.

Even otherwise reasonable players can eventually succumb to the Monty Haul Syndrome and end up with less-than-balanced characters. Most FRPGs are structured in such a way that one of a character's primary goals in the game is to gain treasure and magical items. Even if you keep these rewards to a minimum, they eventually pile up, since it is easier for a DM™ to bestow treasure than it is to take it away. After enough of these profitable ventures, your players' characters may have a lot more firepower than you are comfortable with.

Another problem that a DM often faces is the player whose character disrupts a party. This player may put the rest of the party at risk through carelessness. His character might periodically decide to wander off alone down a dark hall without checking adequately for traps or other hazards, and may end up triggering a device that floods the entire dungeon. He may frequently argue with the rest of the group, slowing down play. Worst of all, your problem player may have a penchant for starting fights within the party or for killing off other PCs.

How does a good DM deal with these problems without spoiling the fun for the rest of the group? This article examines why these situations occur and what can be done to alleviate them.

### Problem players

Players who want to run characters with higher ability scores and more firepower than the average dragon are a fairly common nuisance. Rather than attempting to deal with them during the game itself and creating unwelcome interruptions for your other players, take a good look at a player's character sheets *before* you accept them. It is more constructive to be firm with your players at

the outset about what you will not tolerate in your game.

### Setting your limits

No matter how much a player nags, do not allow yourself to be cajoled, persuaded, or bullied into allowing an unbalanced character into your game. Put a ceiling on character score totals. This will vary in different games, but for the AD&D and D&D® games' six-characteristic system, I recommend that you allow a character's combined scores to be no more than 85 in a beginning game and 100 in a more advanced game. Count additional strength from 18/01 to 18/00 at 1 point per additional /20 or fraction thereof. Thus, an 18/01 strength counts for 19 points, not 18, and 18/00 strength counts for 23 points towards the total.

Don't be afraid to take powerful magical items away from your PCs. Items that are primarily used as crutches rather than as creative role-playing aids should definitely be excised. If your players can always blast their way out of any challenge with sheer firepower rather than having to save themselves with their problem-solving skills, no one, least of all the DM, is going to have any fun. However, minor magicks and one-shot items like potions and scrolls that must be

applied intelligently to be effective can definitely enhance a game. Leave your PCs enough of these to help them survive in your campaign, but not enough for them to use carelessly or casually.

If players absolutely insist on coming into your game with more magical items than you really want them to have, there are many things you can do to make the possession of these items a lot more trouble than they're worth. I can't possibly list them all in a short article, but here are a few ideas.

Does one of your PCs have a magical item that originally belonged to a god, demigod, or fiend? Perhaps he, she, or it wants the item back and will stop at nothing to get it. Alternatively, send your PCs through a trapped corridor that triggers a magnitude of nastiness in direct proportion to the amount of magic it detects on the party.

If there is a sentient or semi-sentient item around, a DM can have no end of fun with it. That sword, staff, or amulet may have its own secret agenda that it is not sharing with the party, and it may go to any lengths to accomplish these goals. This particular scenario is limited only by your creativity, and if it is handled correctly, it can give your PCs perpetual nightmares and a permanent phobia of magical items.

Don't forget to demand saving throws for each and every magical item carried when a character survives a conflagration, a fall from any height, or even a bout of hand-to-hand combat. PCs will eventually lose at least a few items that way, and this process can be made tedious enough that your players may eventually get the hint.

### Keeping players happy

Once you have gotten the PCs pared down to a reasonable level, you are left with the task of keeping them happy with what they have. The desire to play super-powerful characters frequently stems from the player's power fantasies. After all, what player does not want a character who is looked up to by the common folk as a mighty warrior, mage, or priest? There are few vicarious thrills in playing a character who is merely Joe or Jane Average. What many gamers are looking for is the thrill of role-playing an important, powerful person—a hero. Unfortunately, many players' idea of a powerful hero can be somewhat unrealistic at best.

Characters of low level in a world where the typical encounter is an adult dragon are obviously out of place. Your players will feel powerless and ineffective in this campaign, and they will derive very little enjoyment from the game before their characters are killed. Likewise, characters of high level who storm small farming villages by raining *fireballs* down from their flying citadels are not going to enjoy themselves for very long, either.

The obvious solution would seem to be to set high-level challenges for high-level characters. Some DMs are creative enough

to keep pace with their players, at least for awhile. The problem with this is that unless you are very strict about doling out treasure, your games eventually begin to resemble a nuclear escalation scenario. As your PCs gain more firepower, so does the opposition. This can get pretty ridiculous after awhile, with gods and major fiends showing up regularly on your common encounters table.

A large part of my enjoyment of an FRPG is the ability to suspend disbelief and enter whole-heartedly into the fantasy world, behaving for awhile as if elves and goblins actually existed and could cast spells and wield swords. A super-high-powered game, with PCs battling gods and fiends at every turn, definitely challenges my ability to suspend disbelief and removes much of my enjoyment of the game.

Where's the happy medium? I have found that the best solution is effective role-playing—on the part of the DM. Your players must feel that their characters are important people, at least in comparison with the majority of the NPCs and creatures that they encounter. In fact, the majority of the people and creatures that they encounter should actually be less powerful than the party. The average innkeeper should treat the adventurers deferentially, the average beggar should grovel, and the average woodlands creature should run like a spooked bunny from a bunch of people stomping noisily around in armor. Even most larger creatures, whether natural or magical, know that there is easier dinner to be had than a group of armed adventurers. Chances are, many more of them will turn tail and run rather than stay to fight.

Unfortunately, most DMs prefer to gloss over such amusing and ego-feeding encounters in favor of more "exciting" ones. The player's reaction to this is to perceive the entire campaign world as one in which his character is not particularly heroic or significant, if every single person or creature that is encountered is a serious challenge. Your players will feel much better about their characters if you occasionally let them interact realistically with normal, zero-level humans who will treat the party like the heroes and adventurers that they are.

### Infighting

Conflict within the party is another common headache for game referees. Several situations can lead to party conflict. One of the most common is a conflict between characters, which is often fairly easy to resolve and can actually be used to add more of a role-playing flavor to the game, as in the following example:

Dael stubbornly shook his shaggy-maned head, his huge arms crossed in front of his stocky, fur-clad body. "I trust no magic," he growled. "I will smash through the tomb's door."

"You're an idiot," Natick the Clever groaned. "You don't know what's on the other side. Let the mage deal with it!"

Dael bristled ominously at the thief's words, hefting his warhammer in his thick, meaty hands.

"Peace, Kerathai the elf-mage said calmly. "Friend Dael, your great strength would be honorable used if you would climb that tree yonder to give us a better view of what lies about. Perhaps you might spy a mightier foe for you to smash with you hammer, and I will give the matter of the door more thought."

Grumpy but appeased, the giant barbarian wandered off to scout, while Natick breathed a sigh of relief and Kerathai turned his full concentration to the runes caved into the stone.

It takes some exemplary role-players to solve a conflict this neatly, but most groups of characters eventually reach some accommodation. Encourage your players to negotiate among themselves in character to add to the role-playing atmosphere.

If there are characters in the party who are likely to be diametrically opposed to one another, such as the magic-using elf and the magic-hating barbarian, you may want to gently suggest that players choose different, more compatible characters to adventure together.

If the reason for the conflict lies with your players rather than their characters, there is no simple solution. A fair number of players delight in plots, secret intrigues, backstabbing, and party infighting, no matter which characters they are playing. In a party where the rest of the players prefer to run an "up-front" trusting game, a player who likes to backstab is an obvious problem. However, if your entire player group enjoys intrigue and deception within the party as part of their role-playing enjoyment, there is no reason for a DM to limit their fun.

Other conflicts between players can be harder to resolve, especially if personal feeling are involved. When two players, as opposed to two characters, get into an argument, the DM cannot always step in. What I have found to be the best course of action in these cases is to ask both players to leave the room temporarily so that they can discuss the issue between themselves. They are encouraged to return when they have solved their problem. In the meantime, the players who have not been making trouble can have a larger share of your attention.

If a player consistently wants his character to go in a different direction than the rest of the party, or to perform an action that the rest of the party does not agree on, this can also be a problem. In some cases, this player's independent action may actually be a beneficial one. Other times,



his judgment may be dead wrong, and the results may endanger the entire party.

Although this particular problem may cause you an inordinate number of headaches, it is one that you must let your players solve on their own. Unless you have an unusual group, one or possibly two players who have shown their skill at problem-solving should eventually be recognized and listened to by the group. The players who have been around when these more experienced or intuitive gamers have proved their good judgment will tend to agree with them. Newer players may still argue, but eventually the majority of your players will know who is usually right about something and who is usually wrong. In time, most of your players will be willing to go along with the majority, who in turn are going along with the players whose judgment they trust. If a single player persists in arguing, he will eventually be dealt with by the group.

### Keeping it going

The most important part of troubleshooting your games is making sure that everything is running at a smooth and comfortable pace. Ideally, each player should go home with the feeling that he received an equal share of the action and of your attention. This isn't always possible, but you should at least take pains to insure that no player goes home feeling as

if he was ignored or that he didn't have a chance to fully participate.

Character death is one of the most common of problems that slow down a game. In an adventure that you know will have a high mortality rate, each player can be requested to submit three characters that they would enjoy running. Two of these characters are held in reserve, to be introduced to the party should the first one meet an untimely end. This way, the death of a character does not necessarily mean the end of that player's participation in the game.

The drawback to this solution is that it encourages carelessness, because players are not penalized no matter what they have their characters do. The best way to offset this is to insist that the new character be introduced in a logical fashion, which might well take a few days of game time and perhaps an hour or so of real time. The real time delay is frustrating enough to discourage suicidal strategies and is also reasonable enough that a player whose character has died a "legitimate" death should not complain. Since players should not be allowed to benefit in any way from the deaths of their characters, encourage the party to distribute the belongings of the first character before that player's next character enters the scene. In addition, a player's second and third characters should be made much

less powerful and well-equipped than the original one, as a further incentive to the player to keep his starting character alive in the first place. Experience points, like treasure, are naturally not transferrable between a player's characters.

Another problem is that some of your players will be louder or more assertive than others; if you allow it, they may turn your campaign into a solo adventure. Encourage quieter players to speak up, and set up a system that requires input from each player in turn rather than allowing the players with the loudest voices and most outgoing personalities to take more actions than anyone else.

So that everyone concerned can derive maximum enjoyment from your game, deal with your "problem players" as quickly as possible. The point is to get on with the game and to devote as little of your precious time as possible to troubleshooting. Try to anticipate and deal with any potential problems during the set-up of your game, before the session begins.

When your game is running smoothly, with time for input from each player, it is always an enjoyable one. If problems and conflicts during the game are limited to the ones that were written into your adventure, you can consider yourself a truly successful game master. Ω

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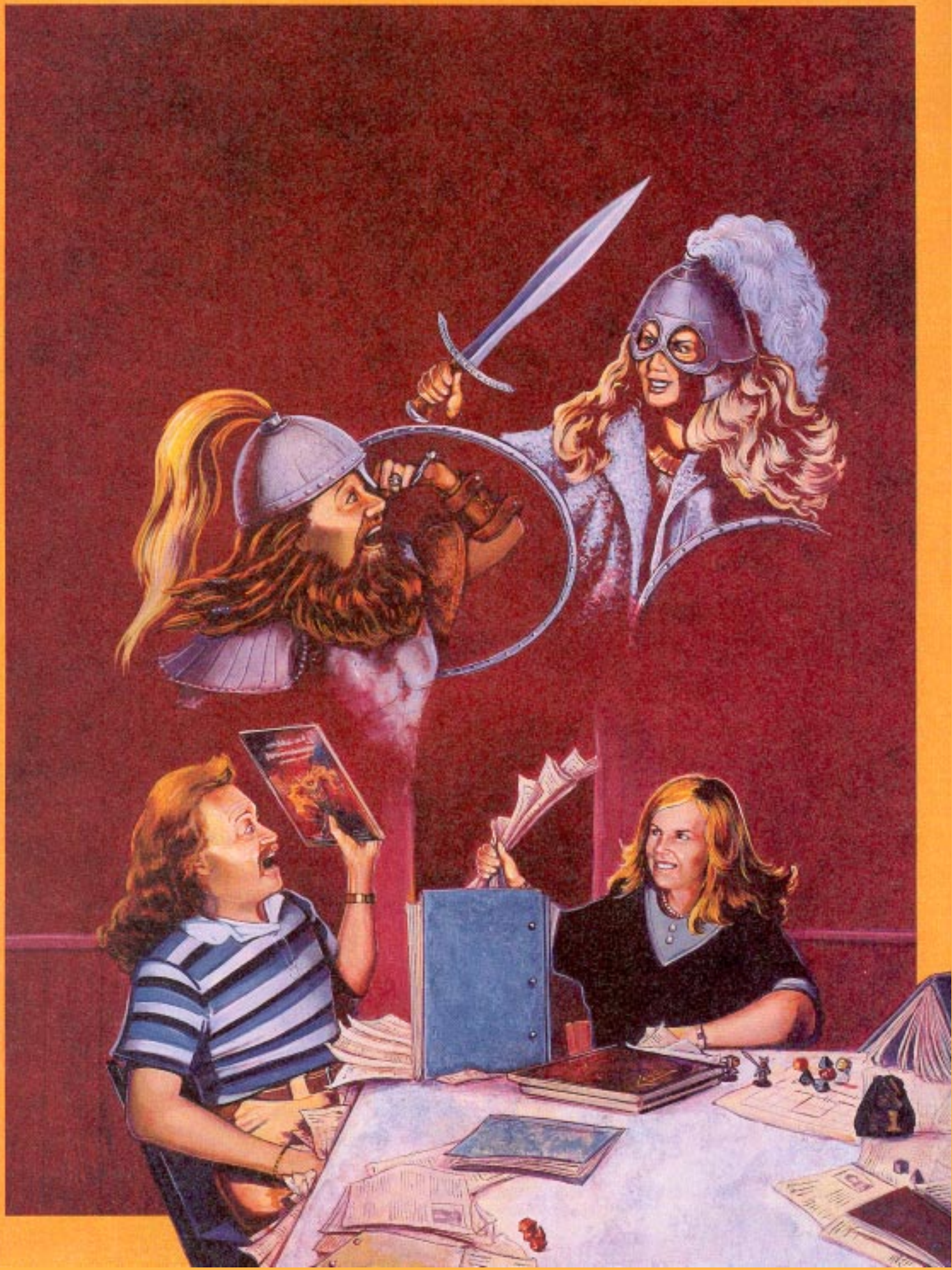
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# That's "Role," Not "Roll"!

Put more "oomph" in your role-playing—and have more fun

by **George T. Young**

Artwork by Lissane Lake

TSR's D&D® and AD&D® systems are role-playing games. Unfortunately, no dictionary gives "role-playing" the definition that gamers expect of it: It's an activity designed to be fun, with the participants thinking creatively and using their imagination. There are numerous articles about new nonplayer characters, magical items, and so on, but few guidelines have been presented on how to become better role-players. This article, though by no means exhaustive, provides a few ideas about how to get more out of your gaming through more effective role-playing.

## Put the stress on role

I once asked a player in one of my campaigns, "Why do you think they call it 'role-playing,' anyway?" His answer was: "Because of the dice." I regret to say that he was serious. Gaming, as he knew it (and as too many of us know it), is the juggling of statistics and scores for the purpose of making a powerful character. Most of us begin playing this way, and for a while it is entertaining. But, as one horde of despicable monsters after another falls to the heroes' swinging swords, the excitement wears off. Soon no one is interested in how many 20s you roll or even how many orcs you killed that day. This is the point where most casual players quit the game, leaving only the hard-core players determined to enjoy themselves.

Around this time, the remaining group begins to develop the art of role-playing until everyone participates in it to some degree. Role-playing is fundamental to the AD&D and D&D games; no one plays because he or she likes keeping records and memorizing charts. The idea behind

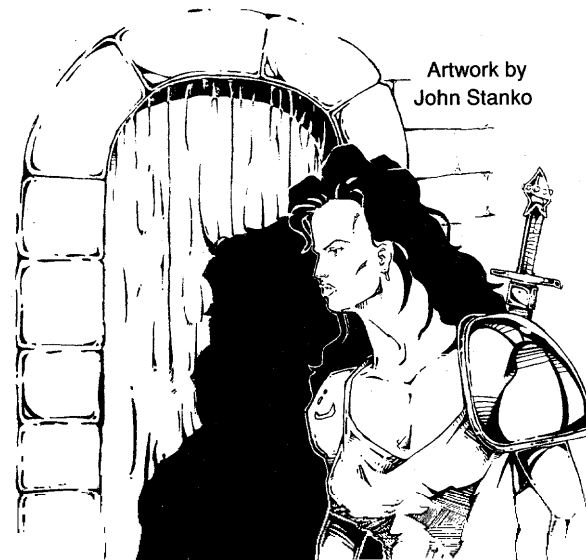
role-playing is very clear: It is pure escapism, pretending to be a person you clearly are not. How, exactly, do we go about this? What tables are there for it in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*? There are no rules for role-playing; there are, however, certain guidelines that will help you become better "role-ers."

The obvious question that comes to mind then is also the most important one: Why should we attempt to be better role-players anyway? For one thing, role-playing is a skill that can be developed and improved; as with any other skill, the better you are at it, the more fun it becomes. The whole idea of role-playing is being someone else, playing out someone's dangerous and exciting (if not always glamorous) life. Role-playing allows you all the fun of being someone who lives close to the edge without any of the risks. The game is, above all, completely safe. Your character can take 17 hp damage from a blow, fall into a pit of acid, or get swallowed whole, but none of it affects you. We all grow to value our characters over time, and we don't like to see them killed, but we don't actually lose anything.

There is a flip side to role-playing: Like most things, you get out of it only what you put in. If you play a shallow, cardboardlike character, you are far less likely to enjoy yourself as much as you would playing a character with a personality and "reality" about him. Whether you're playing an 800-year-old elven wizard or an 80-year-old human beggar, your character should be believable. Actors on stage "get into character" and play their parts; they step away from who they are and become who they are not.

In the same way, gamers need to develop personas for their characters. Once you know what your character is like, it should be easier to assume the mind-frame that allows you to imagine yourself in his shoes. Perhaps your character is completely unlike you, so much so that you would act quite differently than your PC, given a change in circumstances. There are many things you can do to encourage role-playing. It is always more fun to role-play if the whole group is participating; it's hard to get into character when everyone else is interested only in getting the most treasure and being the best rules lawyers they can.

A certain mood also needs to be set for good playing as well, for the mood in



gaming is comparable to the setting in theater. Above anything else, creativity is absolutely necessary. That's okay, though, because role-playing gamers are all creative; if they weren't, they wouldn't be gaming. When a group of people role-play well, their imaginations are in high gear, and the whole group has fun. *That* is the goal of role-playing, after all: having fun.

## Participation

DM: "In our last game, when we left off, you were just about to fight Serpentyne, the ancient red dragon that you have been stalking for months, and—"

Player 1: "What? Where are we?"

Player 2: "Did we kill it? Where's my share of the treasure?"

Player 3: "Which character was I playing?"

In the example above, the players have no idea what is going on. The time spent between gaming sessions has dulled their appetite for role-playing; they are not involved in the situation. At the end of the last session, the group was tense and ready for the encounter. Now, they are so removed from the scenario that they will unthinkingly go through the motions of playing for the next 45 minutes to get back into the mood: imagining what they are doing, planning, and slowly starting to have fun again.

The best way to avoid this problem and the wasted time that goes with it is to get the players (and the DM) ready to play *before* you begin. The way people get warmed up for role-playing is the same way people ready themselves for sports: with warm-up exercises. These exercises should be fun and should help get the players back into the role-playing frame of mind. To start, ask a player to tell you what color the local tavern is painted. Ask another player how his character celebrates his birthdays, and whether or not he kissed anyone on his last birthday (if the PC did, ask who it was and have him explain the circumstances). When the player comes up with a suitably creative answer, move on to the next person, asking more off the wall and unexpected questions to force him to be imaginative. Don't ask him any questions to which he already knows the answers—make him think. The best way to get everyone warmed up is to fire as many questions at the players as you can; when they get the hang of it, they are ready. It's as simple as that. From the warm-ups, you can move directly into the adventure, knowing that the group is well prepared to play.

## Go with the flow

DM: "The bugbears have, uh, thirty gold pieces on them."

Player 1: "Gee, that's a lot. I wonder why they're carrying so much."

Player 2: "And we never encountered bugbears this far south before."

Player 3: "That jerk the baron has a lot of money, so . . ."

Player 2: "My friends, I smell a conspiracy. I think we should pay the good baron a little visit—unannounced, of course."

What you as the DM meant to say was thirty silver pieces. Do you correct yourself, or let the players get the wrong idea? If you have any sense at all as a DM, you leave the players in the dark. The more a DM allows the party to choose their own paths in an adventure, the more the group will participate as a whole. If the party overestimates the importance or role of an NPC, as in the example, work with their mistake. Obviously the idea is intriguing to them, so follow their lead. They will ask you later in the adventure if you thought they would catch on to the baron's schemes so quickly. This is a good thing! The players will feel that they have accomplished something with their clever deductions, and if you alter the plot so that their suspicions turn out to be true, they will be rewarded for the good role-playing they have done. In the future, they will be even more interested in thinking through their actions.

Planned scenarios are fine as long as the planning that went into them does not make them restrictive. The players need to feel that they are interacting with the campaign world, not just following a set of tracks carved in stone. Perhaps, in the course of an adventure, the major NPC villain that you wanted to use is left out entirely. It doesn't matter in the end, because the NPC can always be used later. If you introduce a variety of different villains to the PCs over the course of a few adventures, you can watch the players' reactions to their enemies. Whichever NPC is the one the party hates the most or is the most interested in should become their arch-nemesis. In this way, you don't saddle the PCs with an enemy they are bored with.

The game is designed to be free-form, and co-managing your campaign with your players is an excellent way to bring them into the fun. Too often, DMs fall into the trap of assuming that they create their campaigns by themselves and the players have no input. This type of thinking needs to be avoided at all costs, for it is the DM's gaming *with* the players that shapes his world and gives it a unique flavor. A good DM should pay as much attention to the things his group likes about the campaign world as the things they dislike. When the players feel that they have some control over their own destinies, they take part in the game more often and use more creativity in play as they try to carve a place

for themselves in the milieu. Use *their* imaginations to spark your own; the results will be astounding.

## The impossible situation

DM: "The room heats up as the rest of the house catches fire. Smoke is billowing up the staircase."

Player 1: "Whoa, somebody get a rope and—who's got rope?"

Player 2: "We left it behind when we used it to climb that cliff. What do we do?"

DM: "You begin to understand the meaning of the phrase 'smoke inhalation.'"

The Impossible Situation occurs when there is no easy solution to a problem that the party has to deal with: monsters that cannot be fought head-to-head, death traps, clever NPCs, and colossally poor planning prior to a disaster (as in the example). These situations are not necessarily bad ones; on the contrary, they provide the best gaming opportunities because the players must work together and use clever thinking to escape. A truly impossible situation cannot be solved through the use of brute force or magical items; only inspiration and downright craftiness can save the party. It is a measure of a group's mettle as well; a good group of players will work to find a solution, while poor role-players generally begin complaining or consulting the rules for technicalities with which to prove that the DM "can't do that."

It is in these tense moments, when the players are racking their brains for ideas, that the most memorable and fun playing time is to be had. The time the party bluffed its way into an orcish stronghold and attacked the tribe's leader, a large troll with an unpleasant temper, will always be one of the players' favorite stories to tell. The players felt challenged by the situation; afterward, they feel rightfully proud to have succeeded against unthinkable odds. Player characters are adventurers first and foremost, and they have every right to accomplish daring and unusual feats as long as they have found ways to pull them off.

This is not to say, however, that the DM should come up with insanely difficult puzzles that require hours to solve, challenges that have only one solution, and futile battles. The key to using the Impossible Situation is using it sparingly and refereeing it effectively. How realistic is it when the PCs escape certain death four times a day? Even Indiana Jones would feel hard-pressed to do that.

To referee these scenarios properly, the DM must give the PCs the sense that their hard-won victory is real, and the dangers they faced could have killed them. The game is more exciting when everyone knows that something is at stake besides a

few more hit points. One word of caution: Sometimes, Impossible Situations backfire. The party comes up with a good plan and uses it well, but for reasons unknown to them, the plan must fail. Perhaps the giant wears a ring of *spell absorption*, the door to the armory opens the wrong way, or whatever. In these cases, where the party is going to be slaughtered because of some minor detail that has no significant affect on the adventure, the DM must use his final and most powerful option: He must cheat.

The DM is a referee, but he is impartial for the sole purpose of providing an entertaining milieu to adventure in, not to cause bad feelings in the group. The DM should not bow to party members' wishes merely because they argue loudly; only in dire circumstances should the DM alter the outcome. Change a statistic, eliminate an extra trap, cancel the wandering monster that was rolled up. The point is, the party shouldn't be wiped out by one bad die roll or overplanned death-trap. If you let the PCs live (with low hit points or after using up most of their magical items), they will feel that they have accomplished something wonderful—they survived and beat the unbeatable.

One last word on cheating: If you must cheat for some reason, *never let the players know*. After the first time they catch you cheating, they will always suspect that the tasks they achieved had a built-in safety net, and much of the fun of playing will be spoiled. Use the Impossible Situation with caution. Cheat if you have to, but make sure that the whole group's needs are served when you do. Remember that being creative is as fun for players as it is for the DM; encourage your group's imaginations, and you will open up new possibilities for adventure.

### Creativity and uniqueness

*DM:* "A short, grubby halfling wearing leather armor approaches you, and—"

*Player:* "I bash him in the face with my axe, take his pouch, and go directly to the nearest jeweller. How much gold do I get?"

Creativity is the most necessary element for players and DMs in a role-playing game, since the game is played almost entirely in the imagination. However, too few players use their imagination as well as they might. In the example, the player believes that he is faced with a thief and no actual interaction is necessary, since the player is looking only for a little treasure. The DM is also at fault, for he has presented an encounter with a cliched, uninteresting NPC, and the player is only responding to what he has been given.

For players and DMs both, the use of stereotypical characters is a serious mistake. How many times have players run

into jolly tavern-keepers, pretentious elves, and obnoxious barbarians? People expect that all dwarves are dour and taciturn because it says so in the rule books. Gamers all too often choose character classes and races because of the statistical advantages each type exhibits, instead of picking a profession because it would offer a lot of role-playing possibilities.

DMs should always give personalities to the NPCs the party meets, realistic identities that the players can relate to. No one feels tempted to have a conversation with another generic character. The players recognize the dwarf who always speaks with an Arnold Schwarzenegger accent and who plays practical jokes on everyone, but they seem to forget the dwarf who is greedy, likes only other dwarves, and who makes friends very slowly (if you're lucky, by the time everyone reaches 10th level).

Throw out the stereotypes! Considering the fact that everyone in the real world is unique, it follows that the campaign world should have individuals as well. Players especially should beware of creating "no-personality" characters. The PC who refers to himself as "the cleric" is probably not role-playing. If the DM were to ask what "the cleric's" name was, the player would doubtless have to look on his character sheet. As a rule, when creating a new character, players should think of something unique about the PC, some trait

or piece of his past that sets him apart from other characters. By doing this, the character will have a more realistic quality and be more fun to play. Don't let your magical items and strength scores make your character!

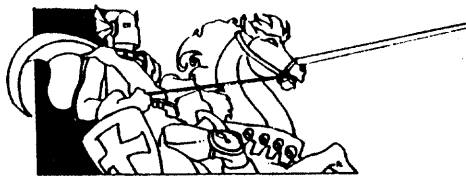
Good role-players will also think of some bit of personal information concerning the character's past that allows for plot tie-ins; they provide information that the DM can use to make the adventure more personal. Perhaps your mage character carries a sword that is the only clue to his master's disappearance. Small tidbits such as this not only make the character more distinctive, they also make him easier to play. Maybe the adventure's villain recognizes the sword. Does the PC attack with special fervor, assuming that the villain must be responsible for the foul play involving his mentor? Does the PC attempt to bargain with him, trying to get more information? The possibilities are endless.

Another good example of this type of tie-in is demonstrated well by Tanis, from the DRAGONLANCE® saga. When he faced the Dragonlord Kitiara, he had to deal with the woman he loved, not some nameless foe! Leave openings for your DM to work with. Once you know a little bit about your character, go on to create a personal history. Where is your PC from, and why did he start adventuring? Detail his family and personality quirks, and get some idea

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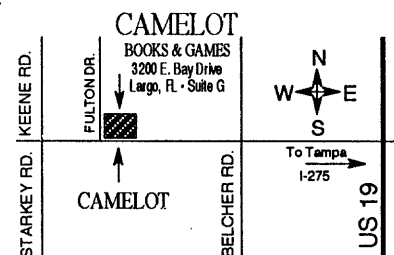
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of how he thinks. It is vital to know where a character is coming from if you want to know where he is going. To use the example of Tanis again, think about what made him different from the other heroes. He was a man torn between two worlds and two loves: knowing both, belonging to neither. He had a developed background and real motivations that caused him to act the way he did. Above all, he had a recognizable personality. These are the things that make some characters better than others. Take as much care making the PCs as you do in keeping them alive!

### Suspension of disbelief

DM: "Since you do not react when the kobolds pour three barrels of oil on you from their high vantage point, their leader chuckles ominously as he drops the torch he is holding."

Players (in unison): "That's not fair! You can't do that! I can't believe you're doing this to us!"

Whenever a DM does something fiendishly clever or uses a carefully worked-out plan, the players inevitably scream bloody murder. The worst possible tactic a DM can have NPCs use against the party is the same tactic they use against every single monster they encounter: thinking. But

DMs should make intelligent decisions for the NPCs and monsters they run; no one would argue that the party should play dumb when faced with a nasty situation. Yet most DMs fail to run their characters as well as they could, for they know that the players will complain (and with much feeling) if they do. The only reason the players do this, however, is because they have not learned how to suspend disbelief. In most entertainment-oriented experiences, the audience willingly suspends disbelief in order to participate. No one stands up in the middle of Hamlet and yells at the actors because they are just "pretending" to be Danish nobility.

Role-playing is very much the same, in that the players need to accept the DM's premises for the whole thing to work. If a rules dispute arises, it is perfectly reasonable for the players and DM to discuss the problem and work for a solution. When the players attempt to second-guess the DM, real problems occur. A good player tries to work within the situation given him, while a poor player generally tries to argue his way out ("I don't think he'd shoot at me, I'm only a cleric" or "Those orcs aren't smart enough to do that. They only have 'low' intelligence."). The players who stop the game to argue over such things are being immature by refusing to accept the DM's storytelling and refereeing because things are not going their way.

When someone does this, it brings the whole group out of the role-playing mood and the fun of gaming. The way good role-players handle these situations is to direct their frustrations at the NPC or monster causing the trouble instead of the referee. If an enemy sorcerer casts a *magic missile* spell at your thief, blame the sorcerer, not the DM. Always react to the DM as a referee; that is his role in the game. The DM handles disputes and makes rulings; he does not cause the party harm out of ill will. It may sound silly, but the truth is that DMs are the best friends players have; without them, there wouldn't be any gaming.

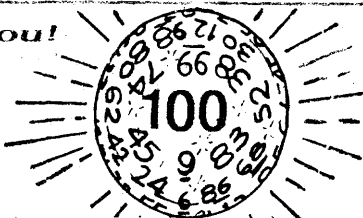
### A final word

Role-playing, like anything else, can be overdone. When your party insists on role-playing the purchasing of torches, the idea has probably gone too far. Use common sense. If the adventure is getting bogged down by too much dilly-dallying on the part of the players, simply trim the role-playing back until it is at an acceptable level. Not *everything* has to be roleplayed, after all.

Player: "You know, Mr. Blacksmith, I think that this is perhaps the *best* horseshoe I have ever seen." Ω

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# Be *Nice* to Your Referee

by Stewart Robertson  
Artwork by David Zenz

Why fight  
the one  
who's running  
the game?



There have been several articles and letters in DRAGON® Magazine on how a Dungeon Master can make his AD&D® or D&D® campaign more entertaining for his players, but how many players consider what they can do to make the game more fun and easier to run for the DM? After all, the DM has to do a fair amount of work before every game to insure the enjoyment of the players. It's only right for the players to take part of the responsibility as well. Good manners and a little consideration before, during, and after the game can make the experience more enjoyable for everyone in the group and make the role of DM much more rewarding. Here are some tips for the thoughtful player.

An experienced DM tries to create an adventure that suits the abilities and interests of the player characters. Part of an adventure might revolve around a certain item a character wishes to obtain, or a trap might be designed knowing one of the characters has a skill or magical item that will free the group. An important part of a game session could be left out if the wrong person is missing. In one game I was running, the characters spent weeks fighting their way to the lowest planes of Hades. The last night of the adventure, the final "Do or Die," was shot to pieces when two PCs, one wielding a *sword of fiend slaying* and the other wearing an *amulet of protection from evil*, decided not to show up.

A lesser disruption to the balance of the game is the player who only shows up occasionally. The DM who has carefully laid out the monsters, puzzles, magic, and treasures of a night's game can have all his work waylaid when this occasional player unexpectedly shows up for one night.

If you are a regular in someone's game and you have to miss a session, let the DM know as soon as possible. You could suggest what your character is doing to keep him away from the rest of the party for that time. You should also phone ahead if you plan to show up for a game you infrequently attend. Give the DM some advance warning so he can work any changes into the game and keep the game enjoyable for everybody.

## Arrive on time

This is simple manners. If you are an hour late for a game, one of two things

happens Either the other players wait for you, which cuts down the amount of time they have to play, or they start without you, so when you do show up they must stop playing to let you catch up with them. If you absolutely can't avoid being tardy, call the DM and let him know how late you'll be Then he can decide whether to delay the start of the game or let your PC catch up when you arrive. Some DMs might even find a way to work the character's absence into the game. ("As you enter the dungeon, Grunt the Warlord is suddenly encased in a trap—an impenetrable globe of magic!")

### Know the rules

Most players of D&D and AD&D games don't buy the rule books until after their first game Instead, they have their friends and the DM explain the rules as they go along. It's expected that a first-time player won't have a full working knowledge of the game.

Still, it's a good idea if the player does everything he can to learn the rules as soon as possible—not just the rules in the book, but exactly *which* rules the DM uses from the book plus his own house rules. When playing for the first time or joining a game with a different DM, ask if you can meet with him before the game to generate your character and discuss how he prefers to run his game. Find out what rules he uses and any particulars of his game. If you've never gamed before, then buy a rule book as soon as possible or at least try to borrow a copy. Now the other players won't need to wait until the DM explains everything to you and you can get right into the fun.

### Offer to help

Running a game is a lot of work, especially if the DM is running it in her own home. Before a game, someone has to clean the room, sweep the floors, clear the tables, and all the other chores your parents always want you to do. After the game, a house can be a nightmare of note slips, scrap paper, soda bottles, pizza cartons, and the cheese balls Russell threw at the miniatures to represent his character's *fireball* spells. I'm sure nobody likes to do housework, but it wouldn't hurt to volunteer to show up early or stay after to help clean up. A half-hour of "hard labor" is little enough to give up for your fun, and it may keep the DM's parents from closing the game down because of the mess.

### Help create the world

In addition to the more mundane chores of housekeeping, there are other jobs a player can do to ease the DM's burden. In any large campaign world, there are a multitude of tasks to be done. Castles need to be created, cities laid out, NPCs put together, areas mapped, pictures drawn, and dozens of things photocopied. Offer to take some of this work upon yourself. Freed from these details, the DM will have

more time to put his adventures together and give you more of a feeling that this is your game world.

If your DM doesn't wish to share the work of creating the next adventure, ask if you can create the village or city your character came from. After all, the character had to come from somewhere, and someday he and the party might visit there. With the DM's approval, you can map out the village and write up some brief descriptions of a dozen or so people who would be important to the character. The DM can then put "your" village somewhere on his map for all the world to see. He might even decide to run an adventure there some day.

### Food & munchies

It never fails. You've got your dice and notes laid out and you're ready for some serious role playing, when suddenly someone on the other side of the table announces that she wants some soda, chips, pizza, or whatever. Now everybody has to wait while she goes to the store.

People enjoy their munchies, and during a long game they can be a necessity of life. But let's make sure they don't subtract from game time. There are several ways to handle this. Everyone could simply bring their own, or the players could all agree to take turns buying the food. In my current game, the first person who shows up is sent out to buy pop and chips, paying for them with money from a common pot

that everyone chips into each week. No matter how it is done, the food should be ready before the game starts. Don't ignore the healthy snacks—carrots and celery taste great with a little chip dip.

### Less gab, more play

Even the most serious players interrupt the game now and then. Jokes and side stories are a common happening in any friendly group and help to make the game more enjoyable Still, constantly interrupting the game with jokes or stories about previous adventures can be a source of aggravation for other players. I've known players who would give a complete description of an entire campaign at the least opportunity. Equally annoying are the people who constantly make jokes about the game at hand. I find it distracting to have someone poking fun at everything the DM or other players say and do. Feel free to make jokes or comments when they are appropriate, but don't stray too far from the game you're playing. Most of all, know when to quit.

### Pay attention

Not everyone's characters are going to be directly involved at all times. Some PCs might be split away from the main group for a while, have a *sleep* spell thrown on them, or fall in a trap everyone else missed. Whatever the case, you should try to pay attention to what is happening. Eventually your "absent" character will be





back into the action.

Some players don't have the patience to sit quietly and listen. They start talking to whomever is sitting next to them or begin going through any gaming books sitting nearby. I've even seen players leave the game table to turn on the television or play games on the computer. When their PCs were finally back into the action, the game had to stop while they were brought up to date. It's better to pay attention so things won't need repeating.

### Wait your turn

During the game, especially in combat, there will be times when all players want their characters to react. But, if everyone talks at the same time, no one can clearly hear what is going on. Some DMs go around the table and ask each person in turn what their characters are doing, while others have the players roll dice for initiative. Either way, wait until you're called upon before speaking out. Whatever you do, don't interrupt someone else.

Another type of interruption is note-passing. Notes can be very important in a game, but if they aren't used sparingly they can be another form of "talking" out of turn. Unless what you are doing is supposed to be a secret from the other PCs, leave the note paper alone.

### Listen to the DM™

This is another case of speaking out of turn: The DM is trying to describe something, but the players interrupt with questions before she is finished. I've run games in which I would be giving the players the dimensions to a room their characters have entered when someone interrupted to ask if there were any monsters present. My description of the monsters was then interrupted by someone asking about what kind of treasures there are in the room. By now I'm having trouble remembering what I've already told the players, while the person doing the mapping is still waiting to find out the size of the room. Let the DM finish talking before you start asking questions.

### Plan ahead

Players can really get into combat. You'd think some people were actually fighting these imaginary battles. Unfortunately, nothing destroys the excitement faster than a break in the momentum. Someone who can't make up his mind on what his PC is doing or who asks a dozen questions before declaring his actions destroys the illusion the DM has created. If you need to ask a question, keep it short. Otherwise, just announce your PC's actions and roll the dice as needed. Since I feel my players are trustworthy, I prefer to have them make their die rolls at the beginning of the turn, then call their names and have them

tell me just tell me how much damage the characters did. The important thing is to keep combat moving swiftly.

### Stay organized

Every new PC begins "life" with a fresh character sheet that contains the name, statistics, and starting possessions of the player's persona. Soon it will be detailed with his experience totals, new hit points, and lists of abilities and magical items. After a short time, this clean character sheet is a mess of altered statistics, party treasure, new magical items, and erased information.

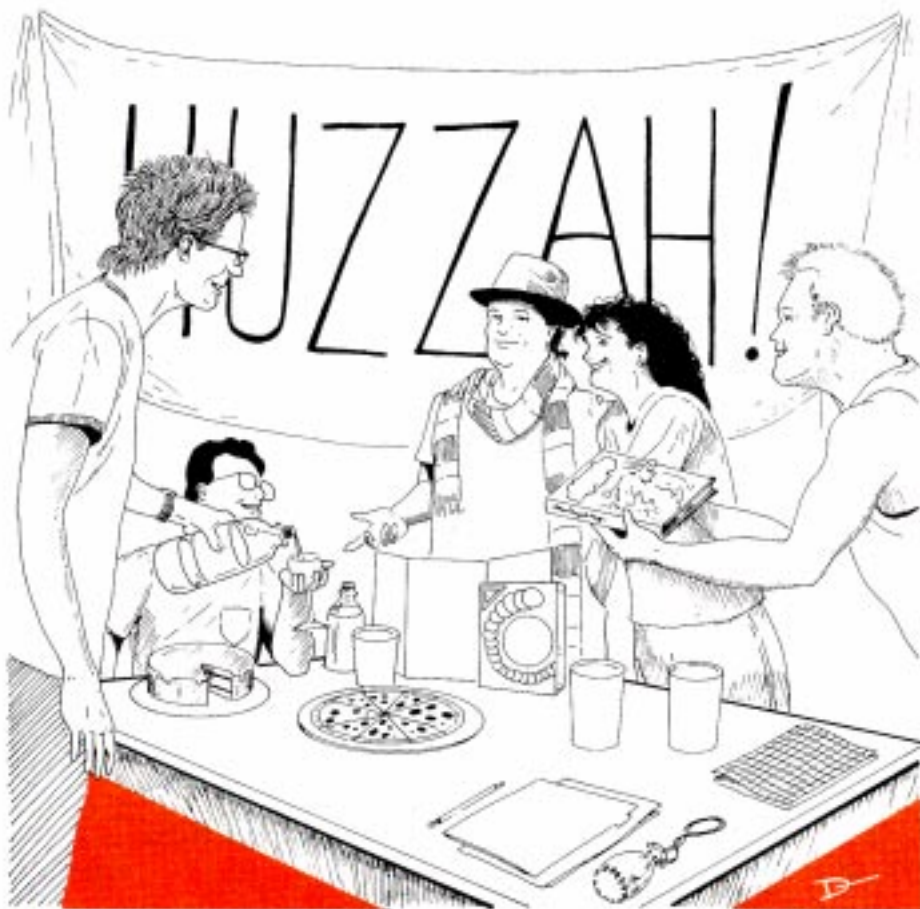
Troubles can arise when a player or DM needs specific information about the character. Nobody likes to wait for someone to read through her notes, looking for one small piece of knowledge buried in the mess. At the same time, one particular possession or magical item can mean the difference between succeeding, failing, or dying for your band of brave adventurers.

In one game I played in our characters were in the middle of a dungeon when they were attacked by a medusa with six troglodyte henchmen. She petrified one wizard, then began using her serpents' bites while her troglodytes hacked away at the party. After five minutes of melee, the player of the "stoned" mage noticed on his character sheet a *medallion of gaze reflection* he had completely forgotten about (it was listed on his sheet under "Camping Supplies"). The DM then had to make a difficult choice: He could ignore the forgotten medallion and continue the combat, or he could pull the game back to the beginning of the battle and hope everybody could remember how many hit points they had already lost and how many charges they had used from their magical items. As it was, nobody was pleased with the player of the mage.

When you add information to your character sheet, try to keep everything as organized as possible. Write down the character's magical items on one side of the page and the party treasure lists on the other. Write everything in pencil. If there's something that you need to remove, erase it instead of crossing it out. If the paper starts to get worn out or disorganized, get a fresh character sheet and recopy the current information. Above all else, keep your character organized.

### Character stability

Long-time role-players enjoy creating a new character every now and then. It allows them to play different roles and can add a little life to the game. But take it easy! I have seen players who want to play new characters or different classes every other game session. Experimentation is well and good, but how can the DM build any consistency into his world if the players insist upon popping different PCs in and out without any warning? It also doesn't make much sense for one person to disappear and someone new to show up



without reason in the middle of a dungeon. Finally, what happens if the player of a key character suddenly decides to run someone new at a critical point of the planned adventure?

If you wish to create a new character, discuss it with your DM. He can then find a good point to retire one character and introduce another into the game.

### The style of play

There are as many ways to play D&D or AD&D games as there are DMs. While one DM likes a little thought-provoking mystery, another prefers nothing but hack-and-slash fighting, and a third uses little or no combat at all. Many enjoy running the interaction of the characters while others consider such things boring. One has no magic in his game, and another has magic around every turn.

There's nothing wrong with any of these styles of play, but different people prefer different kinds of role playing. If your DM doesn't run the type of game you like, you should find a DM who does. It may take a bit of looking, but somewhere out there is a game to fit your preference. If you can't find one, consider running your own game. Whatever you do, don't try to force the present group to play the way you want them to.

### Don't ignore the obvious

Despite rumors, DMs are not gods. No matter how hard they try, they cannot create an exciting adventure for every direction a party of adventurers might want to take. Nor is it their job to herd the PCs into their next adventure as if they were cattle. Instead, a good DM will put some obvious signposts in her games to suggest one of several possible adventures. She might tell the players about a legend of lost treasure, present a person or group who needs help, or just land the characters at the front door of the nearest dungeon.

Pay attention to these subtle and not-so-subtle hints. While the DM isn't trying to lead the characters by the hand, she still needs to inform them where the next possible adventure will take place. When the players insist on ignoring everything the DM has planned, then she has no choice but to run random encounters, create something on the spot, or resort to forcing the characters into their next adventure.

It is your choice as a player whether or not you wish to have your character go on any particular quest. This makes you ultimately responsible for how much action your character sees. If the DM gives you three possible directions, don't go the fourth way. If you do choose to run away from the planned adventure, don't be

disappointed if nothing exciting happens to your character that night. It's difficult to run a good campaign, but it's impossible to have any enjoyable gaming if the players constantly try to go the wrong way.

### Future directions

A good DM likes to run adventures the players are interested in, so he wants to hear the opinions and suggestions of the players. This is important when a major expedition has ended and the next game starts a new adventure. Are there some loose ends from a previous adventure the characters would like to explore? Is there some great task they wish to set for themselves? Is there some city or unknown country they'd like to visit? Tell the DM! The characters' interests could wind up being the focal point of the next game. Telling the DM the characters' plans for the next game session also cures the "wrong way" syndrome mentioned in the last section, since he now knows which way the characters are planning to go and is able to concentrate on those directions.

Making life easier doesn't require a lot of effort. All it takes is a little forethought and consideration. By removing the distractions and bothersome holdups from the game, role-playing games will be far more enjoyable experiences for the other players as well as the DM. Ω

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## Oversized Heavy Mechanized Units



# ROLES

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# FOR ROLE-PLAYERS

by David Wilder

Artwork by David Zenz

When playing a role-playing system like the D&D<sup>®</sup> or AD&D<sup>®</sup> game, there are several roles the players can perform during the playing session that can make the game more exciting. These roles help playability by taking some tasks from the Dungeon Master and letting players assist in running the game. Using the abilities of the players to help create the world in which their characters live can make gaming sessions more exciting for everyone. Here are some suggestions.

## Where are we?

The Map Keeper is in charge of creating visual aides from descriptions given by the DM. If a player character is actually mapping, the map and any other drawings may be kept by the players and noted or referenced in the chronicle (see later). If no PC is mapping, then any written descriptions should be given to the DM when the PCs leave that area.

The player performing this mapping role need not be an artist, though he should have graph paper and several pencils with good erasers. This person primarily does the mapping for the group and creates the floor plans in important areas, such as areas where melee takes place. The setting-up of any other visual aides, such as PC and monster miniatures and 3-D displays of walls, doors, and other terrain features, are an optional responsibility of the Map Keeper (with appropriate help from the DM).

## When was that?

During melee, a chase, or other time-sensitive situations, the Timekeeper helps the DM and the players ensure that all actions are timed properly. At the end of each round, the Timekeeper records the passage of time, working with the DM and other players to see that attacks, spells, etc. are timed correctly. The Timekeeper also keeps track of the current date, assists the Chronicler (see later) in calendar keeping, and announces PC hit points regained through rest. The Timekeeper also keeps track of when the characters have eaten, how much food and drink are still available, whether food has gone bad or not, and any other time-activated concerns of the party. This role is especially important in timed adventures and encounters.

## Who's in charge?

The Speaker designates the marching order and coordinates the strategy of the group with the input of the other players. This player is the main speaker for the group to the DM, and it is recommended that his character be the main speaker for the party to all nonplayer characters (this makes it much easier to determine who is speaking within the game context). Of course other characters should feel free to interact, but the Speaker should be the player in charge of the verbal communication for the group. This role is best handled by the player who controls the PC with the highest Charisma rating, though a well-spoken and clever player may take the role if her character has a reasonable Charisma. The Speaker must be very familiar with the names, classes, and personalities of all the characters in the group.

## What went on?

The Chronicler keeps track of the story, the goals of the PCs, major NPCs encountered, important actions taken by the party as well as by individual characters, and other pertinent information. This is an important role for solving puzzles and is often critical for survival; thus, everyone should keep apprised of what is in the chronicle being kept, checking for corrections as necessary. If a module takes several gaming sessions, the Chronicler begins each session by reading the important events from the chronicle. Between gaming sessions, the notes taken for the chronicle should be organized, and the actions and events listed with their time and date. The DM should consider using the chronicle to assist in experience-point determination and in creating spin-off adventures.

## The player-NPC

Situations frequently arise in which players could run alternate characters. Perhaps the party gets split up, a character becomes paralyzed or unconscious, or a PC is killed. Few things are more distracting to game play than a DM and a player trying to roll up a character on the side while the game is going on. Rather than leaving the player out of the game, allowing him to play an NPC can keep everyone interested and involved in the adventure.

For example, Tom (a player) is running a mage who suffered a *feeblemind* attack during investigations into the properties of a newly acquired magical item. In order to help the mage, the remainder of the party went on a quest. Instead of sending Tom away, the DM can brief Tom on a group of orc guards in the passages that the characters will need to explore. When the party encounters these orc guards, Tom helps bring the battle to life by giving the orcs names and personalities, adding tactics, and making the appropriate dice rolls. No matter how good a DM's repertoire of battle cries and death yells, it can be a pleasant change for everyone to hear a different voice. This gives the DM much-needed time to prepare for future events or simply enjoy watching the players run the game, and it also helps develop the players' ability to role-play.

Obviously, a player can throw the game out of balance by treating such privileges without respect. Referees should ensure that players do not take advantage of situations by making life too easy or hard for the PCs. Nevertheless, a game referee is just that: a referee. He need not control the entire game. Generally, the more freedom players have, the more they enjoy playing, but game balance must be maintained by the DM.



One important note on the player-NPC: It is not a good idea to allow players to run major NPCs (the master villain, the good high priest who sent the party, etc.). Not only does this make it much too easy for players to destroy game balance, but it is essentially playing with two DMs. While the "team DM" concept can work, it takes a lot of planning and practice.

Players can also assist the DM by running combat procedures and giving ideas toward overall campaign development. The idea is to increase the interaction of the players within the game and to allow players to use their imaginative talents to further create the fantasy world in which their characters live. Of course, the DM must act as a campaign editor to modify or eliminate suggested developments that would destroy playability. Still, increased interaction of the players with the DM makes AD&D and D&D games come alive, adding creative angles that would otherwise be lost. Remember that if you are a DM, these roles train your players to be DMs so that you can play, too! Ω



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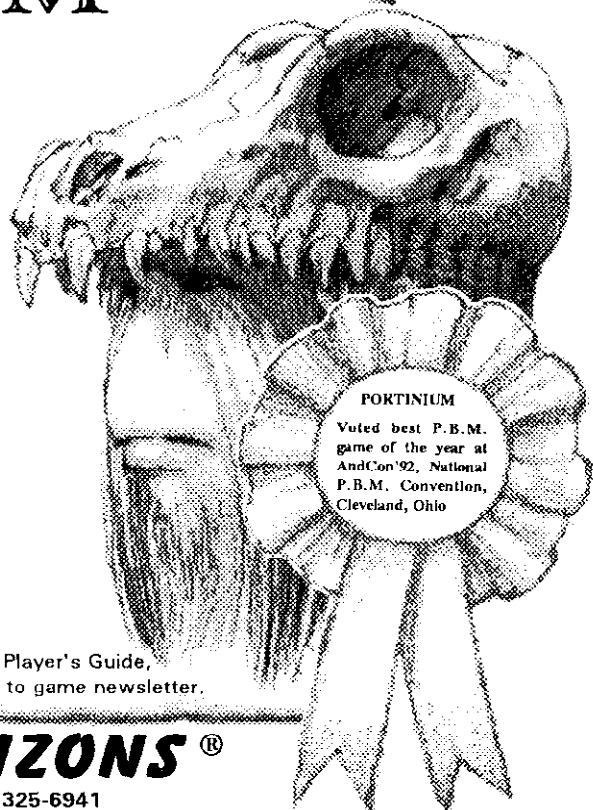
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# Breaking Them In

Incorporating novice players into your campaign

by Neil McGarry

Artwork by Tom Dow

**N**ovice role-playing game players can be a trial to the most knowledgeable and experienced gaming groups. There is so much for them to learn, and the older players often do not want to wait for them to learn it. How do you, as the DM, bridge the gap?

The key lies in making the training of the new RPG player the job of the *entire group*, not just the DM. This spreads out the responsibility and speeds up the awkward period of adjustment the group goes through when taking on a new member. Here are a few tips to help you, the DM, help your new players get adjusted.

**1. Set aside some time to work with the new player alone.** Start the new player off by having her roll up her character's statistics, then let her choose a class. This will be one of the biggest decisions early on, so be prepared to give good advice. Try to remain impartial, however, or else she may wind up choosing the class she thinks you want her to use, rather than relying on her own preferences.

Once that is out of the way, you can get her familiar with armor class, hit points, saving throws, and the other mechanics of role-playing, so she will at least know what you mean when you say, "Make a saving throw versus poison." Ironically, I

find that most new players have more of a problem in identifying the type of dice they need to roll than in why they need to roll them (where else do you ever use 12-sided dice?). Keep this in mind as you and your veteran players are throwing around terms like "d20" or "d12."

When the player begins to choose the specifics of her character (spells for wizards, weapon proficiencies for fighters, etc.), try to maintain a "hands-off" approach. Answer her questions, but don't create the character for her. When complicated rules arise, such as the fighting styles in PHBR1 *The Complete Fighter's Handbook*, don't try to explain everything at once. Unless your new player is a whiz, this will confuse and aggravate her. Go slowly and give her time to understand the more complex rules. In extreme cases where a difficult choice must be made, recommend specifics that you know she will be happy with, and be willing to let her change these retroactively as she gains experience. The other players may howl when you let her change one proficiency to another, but they should be willing to compromise to accommodate the new player (and if not, then a few good DM growls should suffice to convince them). Finally, be prepared to stop game-play when the new player runs into a

problem; this slows down play at first but should happen less often as time goes by and the novice gains confidence.

Beware of the novice who nods too much, because it probably means that she doesn't understand what's going on but is afraid to slow down the game to ask for an explanation. Take the time to explain anything she doesn't understand, and make certain she knows that you are willing to answer *any* questions.

Most importantly, be sure that the novice turns first to you, the DM, for advice on specific rules. The other players may be well-intentioned in their efforts to advise her, but as we all know, many players have their own versions of the rules ("Oh, sure, you can bring a war elephant into a dungeon!"). This requires the DM have a working knowledge of the rules herself, a necessary prerequisite for any good referee.

**2. Emphasize preparedness.** The new player must be willing to spend the time and effort to learn the rules, or else your best efforts will be wasted. Of course, he cannot be expected to become a rules expert after just a few sessions, but he should have a willingness to read the rule-books on his own. Again, if you let him lean on you too much at first, you'll wind

up playing his character for him. To help him out, write or type out a summary of the most important rules needed during play, such as calculating THACO, initiative, etc., that he can keep within easy reach and refer to as needed. This will save countless minutes of frantic flipping through the *Player's Handbook* for a table or chart. One idea that works particularly well is drawing up an attack matrix (see the AD&D® 1st Edition game's *Dungeon Master's Guide*, pages 74-75), according to his character's chance to hit. THACO can be a difficult concept to master, and this will ease him into calculating his chance of success for himself. Another useful addition to the summary is on page 93 of the AD&D 2nd Edition game's *PH*, entitled "What You Can Do in One Round." I find that one of the most frequently asked questions of new players is "Well, what can I do?" so this information should give them a head-start on the answer.

If the player is using a spell-caster (something that is not recommended for most novice players), photocopy or type out the spell listings on pages 126-128 of the *PH* and highlight those his character has access to. This comes in especially handy for priest characters, whose major and minor access to various spheres is certain to confuse a new player. Allow the

player to use these aids freely, while stressing that they exist to supplement the rules, not substitute for them. Getting familiar with the rules themselves requires a little time away from the gaming table, but as all experienced players know, it's worth the effort. If the player is lagging on his "homework," a word to the wise should be sufficient to motivate him. The best advice a DM can give a new player is "Know your character." Learn what he can do, and what he can't.

**3. Assign another player to be a guide for the novice.** Ask for volunteers or assign someone you trust to lend responsible guidance. Your players may not be inclined to do this, so simply remind them that breaking in the new player is everyone's job, not just the DM's. If that doesn't work, try a small bribe to sweeten the pot (extra experience points, for example, depending on the guide's performance). If all else fails, the threat of a vampire or two can be a marvelous incentive to perform such a service.

Once the "guide" has been chosen, tell the novice that she would do well to follow the example of her new guide during play. Emphasize, however, the importance of innovation; in other words, see that the novice isn't blindly parroting the experi-

enced player. Warn the other players that while outside suggestions to the novice are welcome, you will not allow her to be verbally bombarded ("Cast a spell!" "No, throw a flask of oil!" "Don't do that! Help my character!"), a tactic virtually guaranteed to discourage new players from ever returning to the gaming table. Ideally, the novice should rely more heavily on her guide at first, then less so as she gains knowledge and confidence. This expedites play, keeps your players happy, and makes your job as DM a little easier.

These suggestions may not fit all gaming groups; some DMs may prefer a "hands-on" approach to training, while others may leave it entirely to the novice to sink or swim. However it is done, the addition of a new player should not be a trial for the DM, but an experience shared by the whole group. If it's done properly, it can result in a sharp new player, a tougher party of PCs, and a more enjoyable game for all involved. Ω

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# Overcoming Obstacles

Handicapped heroes in super-hero RPGs

by Justin Mohareb

Color by Steve Sullivan

Many gamers think the only super-heroes worth playing in a role-playing game (RPG) are the huge invulnerable, muscle-bound types. They find the idea of playing a handicapped hero somewhat offensive.

Fortunately, the comics do not share this attitude. There have been many heroes who were in one way or another

handicapped. Thor, in his former guise of the mortal Dr. Donald Blake, had a lame leg. Professor Charles Xavier has been confined to a wheelchair for most of his

years as the X-Men's mentor. Psylocke was blinded, and later given cybernetic eyes. Daredevil is blind. Hawkeye is, as a result of an earlier adventure, almost deaf without his hearing aids. Silhouette of the New Warriors uses crutches. Bushmaster, like Donald Pierce of the Reavers, was a quadriplegic who used





cybernetic limbs to replace his own—in Bushmaster’s case, cybernetic arms and a snake’s lower body. Artie from the Exterminators cannot speak, so he uses his telepathic projection power to communicate. The creator of the Box armor, Roger Bochs, had no legs, so he designed his armor to grant him mobility

## Overcoming handicaps

It is possible to run a hero who is not functioning at 100% capacity. There are many powers or gimmicks that can be used to help get around physical handicaps. A simple hearing aid, a robotic servitor, a suit of cybernetically controlled armor, a telekinetic power, or magical spells could be used to negate or counteract handicaps. Cybernetic limbs could be used also. Some heroes, like inventors and psychics, do not engage in physical combat often, so physical handicaps would be less of a hindrance to them. A psychic could be deaf, and “hear” by reading thoughts directed at him. Or he could be able to communicate by true telepathy.

A magic-using or mentalist character could be unable to walk, or could be paralyzed, unable to move at all. This hero still could adventure in her astral form, however. It would be downright interesting to have a character whom the others would never see in a solid form, but only in an amorphous mist resembling a human body. Imagine the character assuming she is immune to physical attacks, but then having to fight a gaseous vampire, or the astral form of an opposing mage or psychic. A wheelchair-bound villain can still be an excellent mastermind, and from the chair he may control various death traps. Imagine an evil genius, trapped in an iron lung, who controls robotic replicas of the heroes to ruin their reputations by robbing banks, etc. Perhaps he hires other villains to do his dirty work for him. Remember Silvermane, the Maggia leader who fought Spider-Man and Cloak and Dagger? He ruled his criminal empire from a bed, and even when the heroes found him, he was still able to protect himself. Later, his brain was placed in a cybernetic body that let him mix it up with them directly.

## Benefits for handicapped PCs

Why would a player want to play a character with a physical handicap? One reason is that the Judge might allow bonus Karma points for good role-playing. Another reason is that they could simply be forced to do it. A better reason is that the Judge allows a +1CS to a certain ability or superpower. (Bonus points could be awarded during the character-creation process, if the game system you use has that feature). For example, if Charles Xavier was a starting character, then he would have been given a +1CS to his mental abilities to compensate for his

handicap. Daredevil may have, in response to his blindness, been given a +1CS or +2CS bonus to his Intuition ability, or perhaps was given sonar as a bonus power. Penalties for blind characters engaged in combat without some sort of compensation could be the same as the penalties for fighting in darkness, as given in the MARVEL SUPER HEROES™ Advanced Set Judge’s Book.

There may be unforeseen benefits to a physical handicap if the Judge is imaginative. How often has some villain tried to use a hologram, illusion, or some blinding tactic on Daredevil? Hawkeye was immune to Angar the Screamer’s and Screaming Mimi’s sound-induced hallucinations because he couldn’t hear the sounds. Cyborg of the Teen Titans never has to worry about losing an arm because he can simply have it soldered back on. Donald Pierce would be missing an arm right now (if he wasn’t already) due to the attack Wolverine made on his extremity in the battle with the Hellfire Club several years ago. A cyborg might also be immune to the stunning or extra damage effects of certain martial arts due to the lack of nerve centers in their cybernetic limbs

## Role-playing handicapped heroes

The Judge could use handicaps as a role-playing tool. A character could find it imperative to see the mayor, but she cannot enter City Hall because she cannot get up the steps in her wheelchair and there is no handicapped-access ramp. Using public transportation, going shopping, or even making a phone call can be difficult for many handicapped persons due to problems of accessibility. Perhaps the hero is in the vicinity of a criminal trying to escape from the police. A deaf hero couldn’t hear the police sirens. A hero in a wheelchair probably couldn’t chase the criminal down a busy city street and catch him. Scenarios even can teach the players about what it is like to be handicapped in today’s society. Don’t get too preachy about this, though, and don’t do this too often so as not to completely frustrate the character. Maybe the handicapped hero can later work to improve accessibility for all handicapped people.

An excellent adventure could be built around a character who hears that there is an NPC capable of removing or curing his handicap. This can lead to the character being healed by magic, regeneration, or some type of cloning. Or, the hero could arrive to find his potential benefactor dead in the snow, and have to avenge his death and retrieve the magical scroll or medical notes containing the potential cure. Perhaps an old enemy hears of the hero’s potential cure and kidnaps the NPC before the hero can be cured. The hero will then have a very keen interest in working to rescue the NPC

Whatever you do, don’t make it too easy. As always, the characters should have to fight every step of the way to achieve their goals. Say Doctor Doom wanted a plastic surgeon to repair his face. Suppose one of the characters wanted this same surgeon to do a similar service, or that one of the heroes is the surgeon and Victor Von Doom appears in his waiting room one day. Ideas are starting to simmer, aren’t they?

Running a handicapped hero can lead to some intense role-playing and a good deal of imaginative power use. Don’t hesitate to try such a character in your campaign as a PC (or an NPC if you’re a GM). You may be more surprised at what you can do than what you can’t.

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# Organization

And in role-playing games,

by Richard Hunt

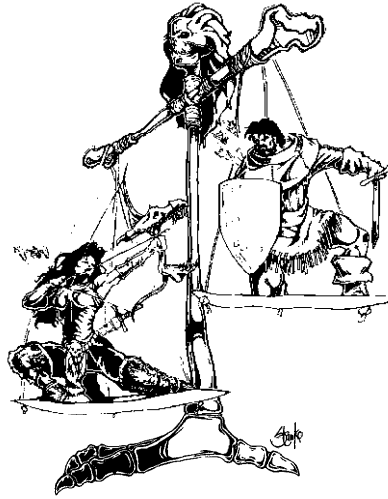
Artwork By Jim Holloway

One commonly overlooked aspect of successfully mastering any fine role-playing game is the ability to organize the game itself. This entails every aspect of the game, from the rules right down to the paperwork that keeps it running from session to session. A badly disorganized game master is a frustrating sight, especially for the players; it can utterly crush their confidence and respect for his ability to run a successful and enjoyable game. A GM who fumbles through piles of rule supplements, forgets crucial playing materials, or loses important information from session to session eventually ruins the continuity of the game. He eventually becomes frustrated and impatient with the effort, as well as the hard criticism of his players, at which point he must either give in or . . . get organized!

Before deciding to get organized, the GM should be sure he really has time to master the game. A lack of time could be the real cause of the disorganization. As we all know, GMs are people, too. If lack of time is the problem, the best thing to do is keep the game as simple as possible. Restrict the use of supplementary material, avoid the use of house rules, or play a little less frequently. This cuts down on the amount of game material the GM must learn and gives him more time in which to prepare. Frankly, playing a simple version of the game is better than not playing at all.

The players can also handle some tasks. In fact, turning over select tasks to members of the group is another good way to find the time for a quality game. Really enthusiastic players, typically those who keep adventure logs, remember past sessions with great clarity, or have a passion for rules accuracy, can often be phenomenal at keeping track of party-related information, freeing the GM for other functions.

Organization is otherwise a very practical matter. Knowing where to put everything is the first step; keeping it there is the second. This article suggests several methods for doing just that, for the



AD&D® game as well as other fantasy role-playing games.

## Organizing the rules

The first task every GM must tackle is organizing the rules. Many game systems present the GM with several optional rules systems, even in the basic rule book. Such is the case with the AD&D 2nd Edition *Player's Handbook* and *Dungeon Master's Guide*. Supplements and additional references may also enter the market as time goes on, and these can pile up—even contradict one another—unless the diligent GM stays on top of them. Decide early on what optional rules you are going to use. Upon buying a new supplement, read it and decide what sections you plan to use in the same manner. Write up a list of all optional rules or mark them in the books. I highly recommend the use of Post-It Notes or easy-stick labels so you can change your mind later. Be sure to inform the players of your selections, allowing them to make the same marks in their own rule books as well. Be flexible and allow the players to voice their objections or suggest changes. In the end, this gives you something to point to when a player declares his intention to use an optional rule you may have disallowed.

Many GMs also have house rules. Write these down somewhere and place them in the rule book or a notebook with other materials. If there are a substantial number of house rules, consider writing up a small pamphlet of them to copy and distribute. New players are especially appreciative of being apprised of all house rules from the start.

Material from game magazines (such as this one) can present a special problem

The best solution is to decide which new rules to include. Be very selective and avoid using every new rule or article. Photocopy the table of contents from every issue of relevant magazines and the articles themselves. Place all of them in a loose-leaf notebook, in date or issue order. Plastic tabs may even be used to separate articles on different subjects, particularly new magical items, weapons, spells, monsters, and procedures. Granted, this is a great deal of trouble, but it could be worth it once you have established a system.

A good way to avoid all this is through the use of a computer database; it can be used to create an index of the articles you plan to use sorted by subject matter. Simply print out a listing of the articles you plan to use after updating it each month. I am in the process of converting from photocopies to a data base—it's highly recommended. Of course, this requires that the magazines be on hand during play, perhaps on a nearby shelf.

Once all this is done, physically separate the rule books you intend to use from the ones you don't; this includes house rules and article notebooks. Place all of the relevant ones on a shelf near your writing desk, computer, or wherever you plot each game session, for quick and handy reference. It is also important to keep books from other systems, old editions, magazines, boxed sets, board games, and modules separate. Many of these can still be valuable reference materials, but the core rule books are of higher priority. Separating the rule books solidifies in your mind which references are most important; it also allows you to just grab them all when moving to the play area without having to sort through them every time you play.

## Organizing the game world

Once the game rules are organized, the game world material is next. The first step here depends on the game world. If the game world is a commercial product, your task is relatively simple; just put all materi-

# is Everything

ve do mean *everything!*

als detailing the world in the original box, placing any supplements next to it. Place this right next to the organized rules on your shelf. Read them often and become very familiar with where specific information (history, politics, etc.) is located. If optional rules have been introduced with a particular world, mark these as you would basic rule books and supplements.

All world maps should be framed (poster frames are inexpensive) and hung or pinned up in the play area if at all possible. Poster frames are really a must, since you can write on them with markers without marring the maps. Leaving the maps in the box does not allow you to become familiar with them. If a world atlas is available (such as with TSR's FORGOTTEN REALMS® and DRAGONLANCE® settings), then by all means use it instead. Atlases tend to be more detailed, highly portable, and by far easier to use than posters. I have seen more than one GM attempt to navigate the party's course on fold-out maps, throw up his hands in disgust, and toss the whole mess on the floor!

The GM should then set about making changes to the world. Just because you bought the game world does not mean that you can't do a bit of judicious pruning. You bought it—it's yours. Take out the things you really hate and add anything you wish. Change the names of places, people, historical events, gods, or anything else, all to suit you. It may even be necessary to make up a few things that the designers failed to develop. For instance, I have found that almost no one includes a world calendar! You could even go so far as to add new cities and develop areas that remain purposefully undeveloped. All major additions should be detailed in writing. Place such information in another loose-leaf notebook or in the boxed set. In this particular case, tell the players only the most obvious changes you've made; let them slowly discover the rest—those parts of the game world that are of your invention. Players who read game-world materi-



al and know it backward and forward will be foiled as well. Do as much or as little as you think needs to be done. If you're satisfied with everything on the whole, don't do anything—it's that simple.

Organizing your own game world is very time-consuming but extremely rewarding. How you develop this world is up to you. First, however, take a look at commercial game worlds for examples of what to do and *what not to do*. A good friend of mine bought a game world, made a ton of photocopies, bashed it with sweeping changes, then discovered that every commercial adventure set on that game world was tens of thousands of miles away from every other adventure requiring great amounts of travel, hundreds of random encounters, or magical explanations for how the party managed to get on the other side of the world! Needless to say, he gave up and moved on to another world, all the wiser.

The real key to beginning is to start with only the basics. This might include world history, the seasons, phases of the moon(s), mythology and gods, kingdoms and politics, geology, wildlife, and ecology. The GM has a unique opportunity to perform many tasks without mastering any of them; he is often expected to be a biologist, meteorologist, geologist, astrologer, historian, political scientist, and artist, to name just a scant few. Players often ask the strangest questions, and the best you can do is be organized enough to know where the answer might be, particularly when the question is about your world. The *AD&D Campaign Sourcebook/Catacomb Guide* is an excellent source of general tips, ideas, and information for *any* game system.

Keep in mind that your game world will *never* be complete. World-building is a very time-consuming process, sometimes lonely (unless you enlist aid), and often unappreciated. If you can live with all of that, then you are probably suited to the task of organizing a beautiful new game world. Unfortunately, no one can tell you how to organize it. Each world is unique in style and its organization depends on the individual. The only surety is that it *must* be organized in the same way that a painting must be painted. Seeking multiple examples is really the best way to decide how your world must be made and ordered.

## The GM's notebook

Once the rules and game world are organized, the GM should decide how he wants to organize the day-to-day events of the campaign, the fine details of the characters' lives to come. The GM should put together another notebook to aid in running the campaign from session to session. The organization of this book may vary, but a basic blueprint for this notebook is very necessary; at the very least, it should contain six sections.

The first section should contain the campaign outline. Using standard out-

line format, the GM should write a detailed outline of how the campaign should progress or how an adventure should be introduced. A single outline should generally cover about 3-5 game sessions if possible, and each section should cover a major plot line. A section of a basic outline for an AD&D adventure might look like this:

### The Dark Arrow

- A. The heroes have learned that Falcon's Peak is newly inhabited by a tribe of goblins, led by their chief Lorznskik.
- B. They are also aware of the presence of a green dragon, Emer, in the Havenwood, though they have not learned the location of her lair.
  1. An *arrow of dragon slaying* was lost on Falcon's Peak; this information is revealed by the new party member who lost it there, Vaulinon. The party hopes the goblins found the arrow and attacking their lair will yield it.
  2. The goblins do have the arrow, but are unaware of its nature. It is a "needle in a haystack" of tribal arrows.
- C. The party attacks Falcon's Peak and retrieves the arrow. They return to the city in preparation for the confrontation with the green dragon.
- D. The characters travel to the Havenwood, where they discover the location of the old dragon's lair from a pair of slightly green-tinted (from exposure to chlorine gas) ogres. After they interrogate the ogres, the heroes go to the lair.
- E. The heroes kill the green dragon with a successful shot—or they are in deep trouble!

Subplots, such as the appearance of a rival party seeking to gain the arrow, can be planned as well. The main thing to keep in mind is that this outline details what *should* happen, not what *will* happen. The party may decide to sell the arrow or ignore the adventure hooks altogether. That's why the GM should have other outline sections to fall back on. The outline is only a very loose script, and the GM should treat it as such.

The second section of the notebook should contain a very simple campaign calendar upon which to mark the passage of the days of the year, keep track of the current date, and write in small notes. A calendar with twelve months should be divided into four pages, three months to a page, with at least one square inch per day for notes (graph paper is excellent in this regard). At the end of a session, the time of day can be written in for the current date. This section helps keep track of time and events between sessions.

The next section should contain all of the campaign's major nonplayer characters. This can be a very thick section of notebook paper, computer printouts of all NPCs (one to a page), or the like. Index cards are really too small to keep very

good track of NPCs. Computer users can also include a list of all NPCs in the section for quick reference.

The fourth section should contain information on the player characters, including (using the AD&D game as an example) their names, classes, levels, races, hit points, proficiencies, or any other relevant information. The most important part of this section is the magical-item listing, which contains a list of all magical items for each PC. This serves two purposes: First, the GM can gauge the level of magic in the campaign, whether there is too much (i.e., Monty Haul) or not enough (i.e., Uncle Scrooge). He can also keep track of information that should be secret, such as magical charges, unknown functions, command words, and the special status of particularly harmful items (*cursed* items, *rings of delusion*, and sentient weapons). An item should have a question mark by it if it has not been fully identified by its owner. Again, a computer is ideal for keeping track of such things.

The last two sections should contain the adventure and the statistical listing of all monsters in the adventure, respectively. Modules should be photocopied if at all possible, so that sections may be highlighted, struck, or altered as necessary. A plastic sleeve for a three-ring binder (available at office supply stores) can house a fold-out style module. The last section should contain the statistical listings of all monsters in the outline and adventure; thus the goblins, ogres, and green dragon from the outline above would be included in this section, with all hit points pregenerated and ready to go. Hand-drawn or computer-generated forms are equally useful here.

## Have campaign, must travel

The final task is to prepare for traveling to the game site, whether it be a dining room twenty paces away, a friend's apartment across town, or a gaming club. Many stores sell plastic containers, cardboard boxes, and other forms of luggage perfect for storing and moving game materials; fishing tackle boxes and cosmetics cases work well. In any case, keeping game materials such as miniature figures, vinyl mats, pens, pencils, dice, scratch paper, calculators, GM's screens, and other effects (trees, rocks, dungeon furniture, etc.) all together, organized, and ready to go on short notice is a necessity.

Using these methods for organizing your game can make as much difference as knowing how to tell a good story or knowing the rules of the game. How can you tell a good story if you don't know where to find it? The same goes for the rules. Players are impressed, at least subconsciously, by a well-organized game. Organizing the game by using these methods can benefit everyone and make the game an event to remember, with an organized GM to thank for it. Ω

# Making the Most of a Module

by Lisa Stevens

Running a role-playing game requires the expenditure of a great deal of time. One way to decrease the amount of preparation time is to use published adventures. Don't think this alleviates the need for any preparation on your part though, for you must learn to use modules properly before they can become a truly useful tool in your role-playing campaign.

Published scenarios have many positive aspects that can help a novice GM. First, most modules are written by professionals, people who make their living crafting materials for role-playing games. These veterans have created a lot of scenarios in their time

and have learned what works and what doesn't. They also have a firm grasp on the game system and thus can highlight interesting aspects that might be unique to a particular game. Also, the work of these pros can demonstrate how to make your own adventures better. In addition, published adventures offer you the use of an adventure that was created with significant time and effort, and which probably will be more intricate and detailed than anything you could invent in the limited time you have between gaming sessions. The companies that make role-playing games have the time and money to include useful extras such as detailed maps,

player handouts, and even three-dimensional buildings to use with miniature figures.

So you're sold on published scenarios now, are you? Well, let me offer a word of warning—there's more to using a published adventure than just sitting down, reading it through once, and getting your gaming group together. Just like writing your own scenario, the use of a published scenario requires a fair amount of work. The end result will be many game sessions of fine play.

Before you play a published adventure, you need to do the following things: Organize the contents, tailor the scenario to suit your world, adjust the scenario to fit your characters, and be prepared for alternative story lines that the scenario doesn't address. To illustrate these points, I am going to use the TSR module, T1-4 *The Temple of Elemental Evil*, which I ran for my AD&D® game when it was released.

## Organizing the contents

**Organization:** This word is a cornerstone of being a game master, but becomes even more important when using a published scenario. Many published adventures do some of this work for you, giving you lists of the monsters used and player handouts to help certain sections run more smoothly. However, you still need to have a firm grasp on where to find information, and how the different NPCs and the different sections of the story relate to each other. If you have to flip constantly through the adventure looking for the relevant facts, you aren't properly organized and your game will suffer.

When you write your own adventure, you become intimately familiar with your creation. When you use a published scenario, you need to learn a lot about it. To do this, organization is the key. Make notes and photocopies of important sections or reference sheets, so you can have all the useful information at your fingertips. Also, make lists of the encounters in the scenario and include any relevant statistics such as armor classes and hit points. Refresh your memory by rereading any sections of the game's rules that a particular encounter will emphasize (such as underwater combat) and make notes



Artwork by Stephen Lanham

for your use in game-play. In short, if there is something you think you might have to look up during the game, do the research beforehand and save game-time for the game. By doing this, you familiarize yourself with the scenario and this helps it to run more smoothly.

When preparing to run *The Temple of Elemental Evil*, I listed every creature and humanoid that appears in the module. One of the important pieces of information in the module is the affiliation each being has with the elemental sects. By listing all the beings belonging to a given elemental sect and where the relevant information can be found in the module, I worked out their defense strategies ahead of time. This way, I was prepared in case my adventurers decided to barge into the temple

instead of using stealth. This roster also proved beneficial when the players stepped outside the bounds of the published adventure, as you shall see below.

Another useful step I took with *Temple* was the detailing of the various treasure hoards. Many times modules will list treasure like: "400 gp, three 100-gp gems, four 500-gp gems and two pieces of jewelry worth 2,000 gp and 5,000 gp respectively." In my notes for the module, I named the gems (an aquamarine, a large carnelian, and a pearl), thus giving more depth to the treasure hoards. The jewelry was also detailed, making each piece unique.

Another important step I took that the module didn't cover was a timetable for the plans of the leaders of the temple. Remember that a module is set in a living,

thriving area, whether that setting is a dungeon or a city. Events are going to take place on their own, regardless of the PCs' actions. Exactly what happens might change based on the characters' actions, but *something* will happen.

### Tailoring the adventure

You now need to tailor the scenario to your game world. Many times, if you are using the same game world as the publishers of the scenario, the changes should be minor, but even in the campaigns that try to stay as close as possible to the original campaign, changes will need to be made. If Lord Beauregard died in an unexpected accident in your campaign, he cannot appear to warn the characters of some impending doom—even if the published module says he does. In your world, Lord Beauregard doesn't exist anymore. Whoever replaced him in his position as Lord will have to take over the responsibilities the module ascribes to Beauregard. If his successor is vastly different than the deceased Lord, then the whole tone and outcome of the adventure could be radically altered.

These are things that you need to think about before running the scenario. As you read through the module, make notes on places where things need to be changed and think about the effects those changes will have on the adventure. By doing this, you'll be better prepared for whatever happens when your players go traipsing through the scenario.

Thankfully for me, *Temple* takes place in the WORLD OF GREYHAWK® setting, which was the campaign I was running at the time. However, I still needed to make some minor additions and changes.

I tied the plots of the temple to those of the greater forces in the GREYHAWK setting, connecting the temple with the Slave Lords and Lolth's plots, as well as those of Iuz and Scarlet Brotherhood. Having all these factions active within the temple made the plot seem much more encompassing, and provided the added advantage of giving the characters leads into other GREYHAWK modules.

### Adjusting to fit the characters

You also have to remember to adjust the adventure to fit your characters. If your party has a paladin who refuses to adventure with evil characters, having an assassin approach the party within a job offer would be a poor choice. The person who wrote the adventure has no idea what kind of characters you want to run through the scenario. If something in the story causes a problem with your characters, change it.

Also, make sure that the opposition isn't too tough or too weak to challenge your players. In your world, blue dragons may be able to toast your PCs, whereas in most worlds, they would be an even match for characters of their skill level. Again, these are things that only you can judge since



Artwork by Phil Longmeier

you are the only one who knows your campaign's characters.

It's also fun to tie parts of a character's past into the scenario. This makes the adventure come to life, as an old nemesis confronts the party again. You often can find spots in the published scenario where the addition of someone or something out of the character's past will make the scenario that much more believable. Use this trick. Your players will never forget it.

In my game, one of the PCs was a paladin of Heironious named Repticestor. In the module, there is an imprisoned Furyondian noble, who I decided was related to Repticestor. If the valiant paladin were to free the imprisoned noble, both he and his family would gain much prestige and honor in the court of the king of Furyondy. This addition added some spice to the module, making it personal for the characters.

### Preparing alternative story lines

As you read through the adventure, make notes to yourself on areas where the PCs might deviate from the story as outlined in the scenario and spend some time fleshing out those areas, just in case. Then, if your PCs do deviate from the path the adventure's author delineated, you'll be prepared. Preparing these potential deviations makes the adventure that much

more realistic if the PCs do take the adventure off its main track. In our own lives, we are confronted by events daily that cause us to deviate from our plans, but we deal with them and return to our initial intentions. Preparing for these departures will add more flavor and greater realism to the published adventure's plot.

I decided that the village of Nulb, which is near the temple, would become more of a factor in my campaign. As it turned out, it was, though in ways I could never have expected. I had detailed who lived where in the village and if they were connected to the temple or not. When the monk PC's *ring of shooting stars* got out of hand and destroyed most of the town, I was able to deal with it because I had prepared in advance. The monk not only took upon himself the task of putting back together the lives of those people whose homes he destroyed, but he also decided to rebuild the town.


Another plot deviation that had larger ramifications occurred when the paladin decided he wanted to find his war horse before the party finished destroying the temple. So, as the group went in search of Repticestor's war horse, the temple itself was rebuilding from the losses inflicted upon it by the PCs. When the group finally made it back, the temple had come out of hiding, had fortified itself, and its armies had swelled. Using the roster of creatures

I had made earlier, I was able to augment the troops as needed, and my timeline helped me determine which alliances had been made. Thus, I knew the composition of some of the new troops. *The Temple of Elemental Evil* ended up being one grand BATTLESYSTEM® game rather than the covert infiltration scenario it was meant to be. This only occurred because the PCs deviated from the plot. If I hadn't been organized, this might have thrown me for a loop.

### Conclusion

By following these simple rules, you can make the most of published adventures, and your world will seem much more detailed and real. [Editor's Note: Apply these guidelines when reading the *DUNGEON® Adventures* module, "The Whistling Skeleton," in this magazine.] Published scenarios can be a boon to the time-crunched GM, but they shouldn't be used as an excuse for not putting time into next weeks game session. If used in that way, even the best modules can fail, and the players will feel cheated. Remember to organize the scenario, tailor it to your world and your characters, and prepare for alternative story lines, and you will be well on your way to a successful, exciting adventure.

Ω



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**CONQUER THE WORLD  
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# Superheroes taking an active role

by Alexander Teitz

Artwork by Paul Daly

The role of the superhero always has been to protect the community from menaces, both super-powered and normal. In most cases, this is accomplished by having an individual hero or a team run patrols around a city. This way they can respond to emergencies quickly and directly. Although this method allows heroes to be the first ones on the scene, there is another way for heroes to take action—have the hero PCs take an active role in the community.

Many superhero RPGs give experience points for heroic PCs who participate in events besides stopping crimes such as doing acts of charity. These acts include everything from donating money to making personal appearances. Unfortunately, most heroes don't go out of their way to earn this type of experience. Instead a hero will go through her job, life, and superheroic patrols and hope that something will occur. In real life, some professions and some lifestyles have access to the dangers of society; most do not. In real life, a person can volunteer her time and become involved with society. Why should this be different with a hero? If anything, a hero can offer more than an average citizen. What normal citizen can support a brick wall, or give first aid at super-speed? This article presents six different categories of activities that heroes can volunteer for, and the real-life organizations that are involved in them. This article concludes with Pandora's Box, a National Superhero Organization that survives by community participation. Please note that the inclusion of real-world problems and issues in this article by no means is meant to trivialize these important concerns. This article merely attempts to add to the role-playing possibilities of a four-color superhero campaign by incorporating modern-day issues.

There are six categories a hero can volunteer for: Health, Crime, Law, Environment, Disasters, and Miscellaneous.

## Health

Within this category, there are a number of subsections including helping the elderly, assisting those with physical and mental disabilities, helping those recovering from addiction, and participating in research groups. Some ways to help the

elderly include driving them to and from the doctor, grocery store, relatives, etc., or delivering medicines or groceries to them as needed. Many local organizations of this type exist across the country. An adventure could occur when a hero PC is delivering Mrs. Bagley to the hospital for an examination, and discovers that the pharmacy has been robbed, all medicines taken, and all the pharmacy's employees are unconscious.

The next section in Health is assisting those physical and mental disabilities. Ways to assist include reading for the blind, volunteering to help those with depression (a psychology talent or skill is a must), and helping build walkways and ramps for businesses to comply with the Americans With Disabilities Act. Heroes with medical training or healing powers could find careers in curing some individuals. Organizations include the United Cerebral Palsy Association, Recording for The Blind, and the American Psychological Association. An adventure could begin when the PCs are working with a building group (to weld metal railings for ramps) when a villain mentally controls the building group to fire the PCs and cancel the project's funding for no apparent reason.

There are many possibilities for heroes to help fight addiction. How do you help a teenager stay off drugs, or a businessman not drink? Again, heroes with healing powers could provide assistance. Organizations include Al-Anon, Alcoholics Anonymous, and DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education). An adventure could begin when a villain starts selling an illegal drug that makes people more susceptible to his mind control, and the heroes hear about it through a child at a DARE program.

The final Health section is participating in disease-research organizations. If a hero is a scientist or engineer, he could be vital in researching new theories and building new equipment to combat illness. Research organizations include the Muscular Dystrophy Association, the American Cancer Society, and National Institutes of Health AIDS research. Campaigns could start with a hero character making public appearances for the American Cancer Society when his grandfather contracts lung cancer.

## Crime

Crime includes not only pursuing and apprehending villains, but also areas such as domestic violence, corrections, and victims' assistance. Fighting crime today is more than beating up the bad guy, and requires a caring hero to deal with the complex issues that arise.

The crime of child neglect has many organizations determined to put an end to this outrage. Organizations include Big National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse and Big Brothers/Big Sisters. Heroes can help by becoming a Big Brother or Big Sister or by helping kids heal from child abuse both mentally and physically. The campaign's PCs could be involved when one hero becomes a foster parent and the biological parent decides to hire a super-powered thug to gain illegal custody of the child.

A hero may have to deal with criminals she brought to justice in the corrections system. A hero might volunteer to work at the local Halfway House, or teach classes in prison. Organizations include the local jails and prisons. An adventure might begin when a PC is teaching math at a super-powered prison and a riot breaks out in another part of the prison.

The last section is victims' assistance. Victims' assistance makes it possible for the hero to see the results of a supervillain's evil up close. Many people feel powerless in the face of crime, and it could be the hero's job to make a person feel like he has control again. PCs with mental powers could read the villain's mind to help recover victims' stolen goods, etc. Telepaths may serve as "juries" to determine accused parties' innocence or guilt.

## Law

A category related to Crime is Law. Law includes civil rights, consumer groups, housing, and labor unions. Law is where heroes with Legal or Law Enforcement talents are most useful.

The biggest section of Law is civil rights. Ways to help include having a lawyer hero volunteer his time to try a case or do research on one. Organizations include the NAACP, Indian Rights Association, National Gay Task Force, and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). An adventure could begin when a lawyer hero is called



into court by the ACLU to help (as a lawyer) in the defense of a recently defeated supervillain because the villain's civil rights were violated by the same hero at some point during the villain's capture.

The next section is consumer groups. Some ways a hero could participate include getting people to register to vote, or investigating a sleazy telemarketing business. Organizations include political parties, The League of Women Voters of the United States, and the Better Business Bureau. An adventure might arise when the heroic PCs' are portrayed in the media as violent people with no regard for civil rights, and any cause (charity, etc.) the heroes support suffers backlash.

Law also includes housing. Housing might mean making sure a housing unit is safe to live in or investigating alleged discrimination against minorities seeking housing. Organizations include the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the National Committee Against Discrimination in Housing. A campaign could begin when the landlord of one of the PC's relatives refuses to take care of pest control, dangerous wiring, unsafe or dark stairwells, etc., and the PC's relative is injured due to the landlords negligence.

The last section of Law is labor unions. Labor unions include the United Auto Workers (UAW), the AFL-CIO, and teachers' unions. The biggest way for heroes to help is to arbitrate between a union and the company its members work for, but a hero also could be called in to stop violence during a strike. A campaign could begin when the hero team is asked to help arbitrate a labor strike and one of the factions hires supervillains to interfere with the negotiations.

## Environment

The fourth category is the Environment. The Environment includes stopping illegal waste dumping, promoting recycling programs, or protesting illegal deforestation. Organizations include Greenpeace, The World Wildlife Fund, The National Geographic Society, and state Public Information Research Groups (PIRGs). A campaign could be built when a super villain team is created from an accident at the local power plant because the plant managers refused to repair environmental hazards.

## Disasters

Disasters range from a simple power outage, to an earthquake or a hurricane. Ways to help include restoring power, rebuilding homes, and providing temporary law enforcement for an area. One organization that heroes could work with is the American Red Cross. Numerous adventures (stopping looting, flooding, car accidents, etc.) could result from an earthquake in the campaign's home city, and could take months to return the city to normal.

## Miscellaneous

The last category is a mixture of all those other organizations that went unnamed above. These include the Veterans' Administration, Amnesty International, the United Way, etc. In addition, heroes can volunteer for local libraries, historical foundations, and museums. Ways to help can be a mixture from ways mentioned above to helping diagnose a new disease genetically engineered by a supervillain.

Besides dealing with problems nationally, heroes also can have an effect on the international scene. The area where heroes can best be used is international relief. On a local level, heroes can collect food and supplies to be sent to a country that is suffering from shortages due to war, drought, famine, etc. If a hero is involved in the International Red Cross, the Red Crescent, CARE, UNICEF, or a multitude of branches of the United Nations she could be sent to a country to help distribute aid, as well as protect those

administering it. Heroes assigned to these missions would be at more risk than those working with programs at home. Heroes could be attacked by super-powered people in the country's government who resent foreign "interference." They also could be attacked by various political or military factions. Being an international hero gets the character (and the player) involved directly with the situation, and all the participants in it. An adventure could be created when the U.N. sends the PCs to a war-ravaged area to help distribute food and they are attacked by supervillains hired by one of the military factions or by the military itself.

## Pandora's Box

Now that you know some of the ways heroes can help in the community and the world, meet Pandora's Box, a National hero Organization whose sole purpose is to help the community before a disastrous event can occur.



Pandora's Box is the name of a nationwide hero franchise specializing in training hero teams to help the community. Pandora's Box is designed to be a safe haven for heroes (especially persecuted mutants) who work directly with community and police leaders. "Afterthought," the Director of Pandora's Box and a mutant (with precognition and mutant-detection powers), convinced a number of small businesses that funding a hero group would be in their interest. Fifteen businesses agreed and funded the current headquarters (including a danger room) and vehicles (vans) of the first Pandora's Box team. In return for their funding, the heroes agreed to take a direct role in the communities where the businesses operate. They would work with police, social services, public works, etc., to see that the communities were improved. Within a year, the six-member Pandora's Box team, had reduced crime by over 40% and been instrumental in building and maintaining a public recreation house and the park around it.

This dramatic success made Pandora's Box a national phenomenon. Multi-national businesses nationwide asked how they could become involved, and heroes in other states asked how they could begin. "Afterthought" responded by setting up criteria for how a franchise group could be created. Her criteria are as follows:

1. All members of a Pandora's Box team must be from the area of the businesses supporting them.
2. No more than one large business can invest in a Pandora's Box team, but an unlimited number of community businesses can invest.

3. Any profits generated by Pandora's Box immediately go to a fund in the community's name.

4. All Pandora's Box members are responsible to their respective communities. If they use their status in Pandora's Box for personal gain, or against the best wishes of the community, they will be thrown out of the franchise.

To date, Pandora's Box has six teams nationwide: one in Albany, N.Y., one in Newark, N.J., two in New York City, one in Los Angeles, and one in Dallas. Cities that have expressed interest in teams are Miami, Boston, Milwaukee, and Denver. Pandora's Box is funded entirely by community businesses and large business grants. In its seven years of existence, Pandora's Box has trained well over 120 heroes. The original team now acts as recruiters, promoters, and trainers for all the teams. In return for having access to the best equipment and technology for transportation and training, Pandora's Box spends 98% of its time helping the community. All trainee members are required to work in homeless shelters, detox centers, and hospitals for their first nine months as members of Pandora's Box. In return they are provided training free of charge and a place to stay.

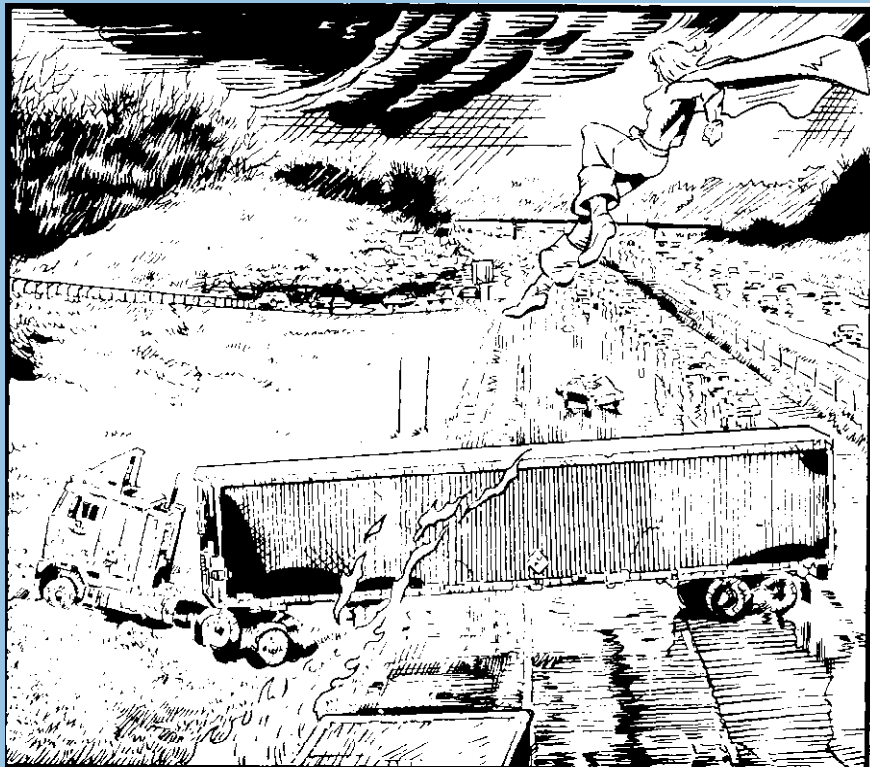
During times of natural disasters, all the teams works together to ensure that normality can be returned as soon as possible. After two years, the trainees are made full members and encouraged to go to other cities and start a franchise.

## Conclusion

The role of a hero, whether super-powered or not, is to help those around him. This can't be done by taking a passive role. A heroic person must make an effort to act with the community. Not only does this bring the heroic person closer to the community and vice-versa, it also gives the heroic person a chance to gain experiences and meet people that a passive role would never allow.

I recommend the article, "Super Jobs for Super Talents: The United Nations Special Talents Agency" by Marcus L. Rowland in DRAGON® issue #160. The setting of Steve Jackson Games' GURPS SUPERS\* and SUPERS I.S.T\* books also includes strongly proactive superheroes.

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