

# MASTER OF THE GAME

PRINCIPLES AND TECHNIQUES  
FOR BECOMING AN EXPERT  
ROLE-PLAYING GAME MASTER



**GARY GYGAX**

CO-CREATOR,  
THE DUNGEONS &  
DRAGONS® GAME

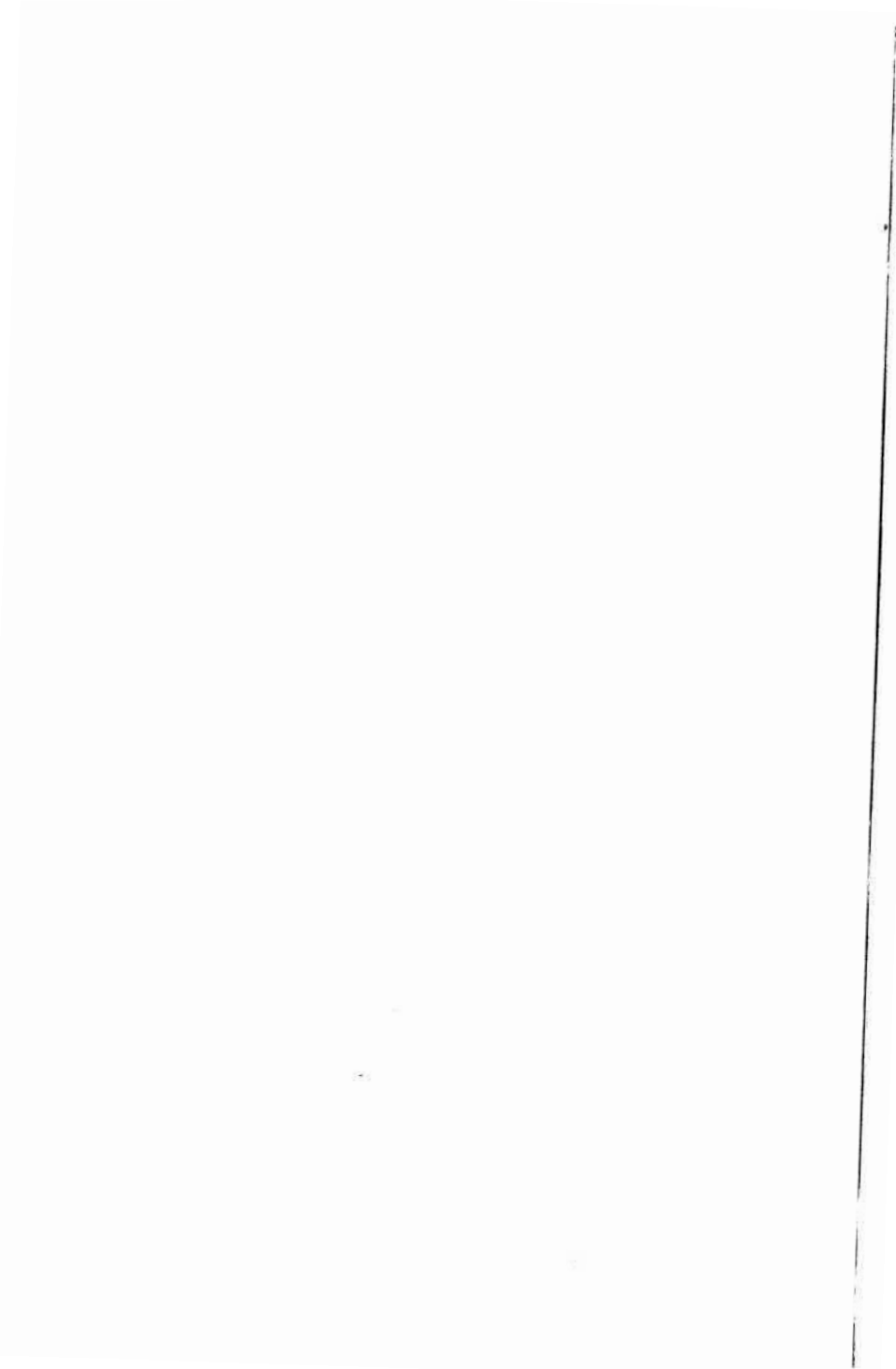
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**MASTER**

**OF THE**

**GAME**





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**GARY GYGAX**



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## Dedication



**T**his work is given with heartfelt thanks to the tens of thousands of hardworking persons who so freely give of their intellect, creative ability, effort and time to the role-playing game. You are more than play-by-play announcers, greater than super-fans, not simply the most dedicated game buffs. Game Masters are the very lifeblood of the role-playing game, and without your continuing commitment to this game form it would soon become an extinct form of entertainment. Bear with me as I presume to offer advice and criticism regarding your dedicated pursuit of excellence in this field.

It is also dedicated to Charlie Kropp, one heck of a guy and a master of other sorts of play. Prosper!



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# Introduction



## Master Game

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## Mastership

**D**o you recall classroom days in elementary school? Return with me now to those thrilling days of yesteryear when your teachers introduced you to the basic questions that must be asked and answered to learn all about something: WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, WHY, and HOW. These are important words, and not just because they are used in this volume as a way of conveying information. They are also the basis for questions that you, as Game Master, Master GM, and Grand Master GM, must ask and respond to continuously as the principal performer in your role-playing games. Brand those questions into your mind, use these words over and over, and you will quite naturally rise upwards in your skill and ability in games mastership toward the desired pinnacle of consummate expertise.

It isn't possible to be entirely specific in advising someone how to attain Master GM or Grand Master GM status. Those readers familiar with my previous guide on role-playing gaming, *Role-*

*Playing Mastery*, will understand that caveat immediately. The reason is simply that the number of games, their personification or expression within each group (the campaign), and individual creativity preclude any hard-and-fast techniques which increase playing skill.

Why is the subject then worthy of consideration? This is a logical question, and one whose answer is best approached by asking another question: "Why do you participate in RPGs as Game Master?" The ultimate answer must be because you enjoy it. The answer to the initial question—why consider becoming a Master GM—is found in the response to the second query. To better enjoy your chosen entertainment form, to gain greater fulfillment from it, the pursuit of excellence is worthy of consideration.

By posing and answering such questions, and through the dissection of the RPG campaign and the dynamics within the playing group, it is possible to ascertain much about the subject of GM Mastery. Armed with this new information, we can then move toward a higher degree of proficiency and skill—art if you will—in the performance of Games Mastership.

Whether you chose to apply the information to your campaign only, move beyond that circle into the arena of convention participation and journalistic efforts aimed at enlightening and informing other enthusiasts, or eventually involve yourself in the greater field of creating scenarios, campaigns, and role-playing games proper is immaterial. In fact, if this work merely stimulates you to better Game Mastership through your own intellectual efforts it has achieved its goal. The degree of mastery isn't germane with respect to the individual reader. *Master of the Game* exists to promote a higher degree of enjoyment. In this way, everyone involved in role-playing games will benefit: you, your player group, and the collective entertainment form.

This effort requires each individual GM to rise to the highest level of his or her ability. If every Game Master were expert, the degree of excellence within the whole field would be vastly superior to that attainable from having a handful of Grand Master

GMs and a larger number of Master GMs atop a heap of lusterless others who were content in mediocrity. Strive to be a Master Game Master for yourself, for your group, and don't worry about the rest. They, it is hoped, will take care of themselves. However, the light of your ability will certainly help to illuminate areas beyond your immediate influence, and such inspiration will surely give rise to greater participation amongst players, in tournaments and conventions, and toward the overall entertainment form. In fact, as will be seen by the explanations and descriptions in this book, your attainment of GM Mastery cannot but have a beneficial effect on what goes on around you within the hobby.

A basic question and answer format will serve as the background for what is an exacting look at every vital aspect of GM Mastery. Certainly, there is a vast quantity of information beyond the deceptively simple WHO, WHAT, and WHERE format. Within this volume, you will find the practicalities as well as the more esoteric considerations of mastery, and a complete dissection of the GM's role in the game. It is all well and good to have the proper spirit and attitude to perform with excellence, but without the tools to put such willingness and ability to work there is no means to achieve the status of MASTER OF THE GAME.

As a final aside prior to moving on, you might find it useful to read the companion volume to this one, *Role-Playing Mastery*. If you have already done so, accept my gratitude and respect—and *re-read* the book. It lays much of the foundation for the concepts which are dealt with in this work. By and large, *Master of the Game* will not go back to give remedial instructions in the basics of participating in role-playing games. This book is a more advanced treatment of the subject.

In contrast to Game Masters, players can involve themselves to any degree and still achieve their purpose—having fun. Mastery for the player is purely optional and lack of it in no way lessens his enjoyment. It is a purely personal matter. The GM, on the contrary, has placed himself or herself in a role of service. It is more demanding in all respects than the responsibility of being a player—just as its rewards are far greater. As the Game Master you



offer excitement and fun to others. If you are serious in this promise, then it is incumbent upon you to become more adept. You grow, your campaign improves, greater entertainment is derived, and the player group benefits.

It should not be necessary to stress this. It should be evident that the degree of involvement and mastery developed give a greater reward to the Game Master than to any of the player participants. At the extreme end of that scale of degrees lies the achievement of having a published work, and who but a Master Game Master can have such material published?

Commercial publication, of course, is the pinnacle of such success. This is not to state that the financial reward of that achievement is a measure of Grand Mastery. It is quite probable that the amount of creativity, effort, and time required to publish would bring greater monetary consideration elsewhere. The most important consideration is that commercial publication exposes your excellence to a greater number of enthusiasts, and the benefits of your art are shared. By bringing them the excitement, challenge, and adventure contained in your work, by showing them the path toward better play, you entertain, provide fun, and make lives brighter. Now that is as good a reason as any to strive toward becoming MASTER OF THE GAME.



# Chapter 1



## What Is a Master GM, and Who Can Be One?

### Or: What Exactly Does a Master GM Do, Anyway?

What is a Game Master? In order for a GM to become better in the role of the chief participant in the activity, he or she must fully comprehend the scope of the position. The Game Master is required to perform many tasks and play many roles in every role-playing game. These forms of participation fall into two general classes. First, the Game Master is the principal figure involved in the play of the game. Second, but of scarcely less importance, the GM is the supporting force behind the player group. By way of explanation, let's break down the GM's responsibility into all of its parts.

The Game Master has at least seven principal functions which are intrinsically connected to the game, its principles and rules, and the technical aspects of play. These functions are as Moving Force, Creator, Designer, Arbiter, Overseer, Director, and

Umpire/Referee/Judge (a single function with various shades of meaning). The secondary functions of the Game Master are Narrator, Interpreter, Force of Nature, Personification of Non-Participant Characters, All Other Personifications, and Supernatural Power. Following is a description of each of these functions.

*Moving Force:* The game has many participants, and the GM is the crucial figure amongst the three or more players who make up the group. While the game itself might be bad or good, the play of the game system is only as good as the ability of the GM to understand and present it. Thus, as "Moving Force" the GM is responsible for mustering players and inspiring continued vitality. For instance, as the instigator of play, the Game Master may recruit players for the game, or guide an already existing group toward a game or system of his own choosing. The greatest threat to the vitality of the gaming group is familiarity and repetition of play, coupled with changes in the player group such as relocation, the pull of other interests, and scholastic or occupational demands. These factors can all lead to stagnation, or the dissolution of the group. Often, without continued revitalization from the Game Master, even the most vigorous efforts at the onset to inspire participation soon fade within the players. As a "Moving Force," the GM initiates and sustains play by inspiring, encouraging, and maintaining vitality and creative energy.

*Creator:* That word may seem inappropriate. After all, the publisher of the RPG system creates, and the GM merely follows, right? Wrong! At the very least the Game Master creates a living "realism" and interest in the game.

Do you as GM devise adventure scenarios for the player group? If so, you are creating a portion of the system. Did you create a campaign—that is, a whole or portion of a whole "world" with geography, climate, weather, nations, politics, economics, population, flora, fauna, and so on in which the player participants use their game participants for many and varied adventurous interactions? If so, you have created a major portion of the game system. Perhaps you took systems and rules and modified them to suit a

sub-genre or a whole new milieu, such as going from fantasy to science fantasy or stepping from modern espionage to future espionage. That approaches what might be called "grand creation." A few more changes and what is the end product is most probably a new and unique game system.

Whatever the case, the Game Master is Creator in one critical sense. He or she creates and continues to re-create the tenor and excitement of what the RPG is. The sense of fantasy, wonder, mystery, suspense, danger, and all the rest are created by the Game Master. When excellence of game meshes with that of the Game Master, truly enthralling interaction occurs for all participants. The mark of the Master Game Master, however, is the ability to create fun and excitement out of an inferior, incomplete, or faulty game system.

*Designer:* Related to but differing from the role of Creator, the Game Master is required to design and develop rules sub-cases, bridging rules, rules expansions, new rules, and possibly sub-systems and systems within the overall RPG system. As the participant most knowledgeable about the play group, the play method (campaign), and game system employed, the GM must be skilled in game design. Even the most developed and expansive game system can not cover everything. The human imagination is too fertile. There are too many unknowns, for the whole concept of role-playing as a game form is too new, and the personalities of the individuals playing too varied. A superior Game Master devises material as needed, while the one who is a true Master GM does so with the benefit of assistance from his player group. Designing efforts prolong the viability of the game because they not only complete the RPG system but tailor it to the tastes of the participants involved.

*Arbiter:* Who but the Game Master is in a position to interpret the spirit, principles, system of rules, and individual game laws (rules) correctly? Who is more able to answer questions more ably than the Master Game Master who determines the answers for his or her own player group or game? No one. Certainly, some players may consider the publisher (and possibly author/designer) to be

such a final authority. However, neither the publisher nor the author/designer controls and serves as the Moving Force behind the play group headed by the GM. Therefore, what they have to say has no ultimate bearing upon the rule of the Game Master. All that really matters is that the GM has the option to accept or agree with certain rulings, whether offered by an outside agency or generated within the play group.

Being the Arbiter is a heavy responsibility, for the success of the group is directly related to the GM's ability to perform this role. Remember that success may be measured by the groups' long-term participation and enjoyment of the RPG. I have personally stood before assembled GMs and players pronouncing rules interpretations and applying principles, and explaining the systems used in the AD&D game. They received the benefit of my thinking and opinions along with a cautionary note: "In the final analysis, you must decide for yourselves what rules you will use. If you employ rules or systems which are different than those put forth in the published game, make certain that all participants know this and understand the differences. Then have fun!"

Because GM and play group might well interact in situations which utilize the standard systems, as opposed to the variant ones normally employed in play involving only the group unit, it is useful to know the standard, or "tournament" rules. But "house rules" are fine, and the GM is the one who will set them down for the others.

*Overseer:* Along the way the Game Master reads and knows the rules, the milieu, and the specific setting for a session of play. How does the session of play relate to the adventure scenario, the adventure scenario to the epic, and the epic to the campaign?

The Game Master must oversee the coordination of the game with the action of play and the needs of the group to make sure that the longevity and fun of the campaign agree with systems and scenarios at use now and in the future. It might be very enjoyable to reward a group of players for success in a single episode, but that elation will be short-lived, of course, for there is then little purpose in continuing. Expectations must not be continually unattained,

but neither must they be continually exceeded. This applies to the internal logic of the RPG world, the campaign milieu, and the particular setting in play. Overseeing with an eye toward balancing these factors can be quite demanding. However, the Master GM will achieve a greater degree of success more frequently than will any less accomplished GM because he or she knows and understands all of the positions that must be fulfilled and the tasks which need accomplishing.

*Director:* Playing a RPG is very similar to doing improvisational theater. Although the players most frequently improvise the actions of their established character, they must frequently shift gears and “pretend” they are not that persona at all but an entirely different one. “In order to slip by the gate guards,” says Joan, whose character is a warrior maid, “I’ll have Darcy (her character) pretend to be a peasant girl leaving the city with the others at the close of the market day.” And think of games of espionage, mystery, and the like where it is the rule rather than the exception when a game character plays other personas!

The broad outlines of the play are known to GM and player group. Then, with direction from the Game Master and their player characters’ interaction within the setting, the group develop their own version of the scenario being played. At the very least the GM gives cues which the “actors” may follow. Often, the role of Director is so well managed that the whole tenor of the adventure raises itself to epic proportions—whether dramatic, tragic, or comedic—as players respond to the artistry and challenge of the Master Game Master.

Direction extends from the broad to the specific, however, in that the GM does very mundane things as Director. Because this is a game, the make-believe characters participating in the adventures do not have any senses of their own. Because there is no reality involved, there is nothing in a scenario to be tasted, touched, seen, smelled, or heard anyway. Yet all of the five senses, and often the fabled “sixth sense” too, function in the RPG because the Game Master provides this information to the players in their game personas. Thus, he or she may direct them by relaying

sensory information. "There is a slick wetness to the cobblestones, and your boot-heels echo between the jagged edges of the buildings," says the GM in setting the scene. "The scent of saltwater is heavy in the air, and you shiver suddenly, although it is not that cool a night. Then, from the corner of your eye, you see that flash of red again . . ." Beyond that, there is the direction of voice stress, expression, body language, and all the rest. Because there is no set script to follow, no "right way" as determined by anyone, direction at its best is a combination of thoroughness and subtlety which is mostly undetectable to the outsider.

*Umpire/Referee/Judge:* This threefold function places the Master GM in a more personal role in game proceedings. While the role of Arbiter is vital to regulatory supervision, this function focuses on the Master GM as a person who must deal with players as individual human beings while maintaining the standards and integrity of the game as a whole. Because the player characters interact with the game system and scenarios based upon it, they do require some supervision. Since only the Game Master can know the motives, thoughts, plans, purposes, and actions/reactions of the sentient creatures and beasts encountered during the course of an adventure episode, he or she must deliver the final word on all disputes. The Umpire role is not a biased one. The Game Master must serve as sole decision-maker with respect to actions within a scenario, combats, and all the rest of what occurs where activity requires determination of results. Various dice rolls called for by the rules may determine success or failure on some occasions. But often some activity not anticipated by the systems and rules will be initiated. As Umpire, the GM's rule should consider only the facts and resulting circumstances, whether as probability results expressed by random-number generation or arguments of fact and logic.

The Referee role is very similar to that of Umpire, but the focus is on disputes or hostile player character interaction. Let us suppose that in the PARANOIA game Slip-R-EEE wants to substitute a dud energy cell for the weapon carried by Boss-Y-JRK. The activity involved would fall into the Umpire category, but a result-

ing dispute later, wherein Slip-R-EEE and Boss-Y-JRK deal directly with one another, is very much the purview of the Referee. The Game Master must handle these types of interactions in an impartial and judicial manner.

The Game Master also determines rewards for character performance in adventure scenarios. This role of Judge does not normally extend to the division of spoils taken during the course of play. (If there is a dispute there, it is the Referee who intercedes.) But in this last capacity the Game Master comments on the strength and weakness of each character's play, and gives each player character the awards and honors he or she sees fit. In some game systems, this might mean the distribution of points toward an increase in professional skills or personal statistics, or an increase in rank, level, or other such status.

Going back to Slip-R-EEE in the PARANOIA example, that character's assumption of the Team Leader role after the demise of Boss Y-JRK, plus a further successful "discovery" of a "Commie Mutant Traitor," might result in the awarding of several skill points and a promotion from red to orange status for Slip . . . ruining a perfectly good name in the process. (Slip-O-EEE doesn't quite cut it, but that's progress for you.)

The function of Judge is a very important one, for the action of the GM in this capacity is a measure of his or her overall skill. Too few or too many awards will be seen as a sign of weakness, or that the GM is being unfair or showing favoritism. Player participants do their own judging of course, and the Game Master is rated continually throughout the course of activity but never so critically as in the case when he or she serves as Judge at the conclusion of an adventure scenario.

Be sure you understand these principal functions of a GM before you read on. The secondary functions are very closely related to the primary ones and usually occur simultaneously. The main difference between the seven primary and six secondary functions is that another individual or individuals could function in each of the secondary roles in place of the Game Master, with no loss of continuity in the campaign or scenario. Let us examine each of the



secondary functions and determine how the responsibility for these tasks might be removed from the GM.

*Narrator:* Whether the information is from prepared text or otherwise, the role of narrator is integral to any RPG, and is adjunctive to the duty of Director. Dramatic, clear, and exciting narration builds much of the mystique of the game. Commercially prepared adventure scenarios and those which the GM has written himself will have portions which are to be read aloud to the player participants. In other cases the GM might relate material directly from his own notes or spontaneously off the top of his head, having been inspired by player actions. This aspect of narrator is closer to improvisational theatrical work.

*Interpreter:* Both expansion and clarification of the rules fall into the interpretive category of game interaction. Questions which might be forthcoming are often anticipated by the astute Game Master. Actual questions are also interpreted in a neutral, absolutely disinterested fashion. "Have we ever seen such a (device, monster, phenomenon, etc.) before?" one player might ask. The GM is cognizant of exactly what the players' characters are experiencing, but because he or she is also aware of the limitations of the situation, the answer will be clear but couched in terms which require the player to rely only on the information known to his or her game persona. "Do you recall anything similar?" the Game Master might respond. "You note that now . . ." (and here the GM reiterates previous material, possibly augmenting it in consideration of the question asked). Merely relating text or extemporaneous material or giving sensory data will not serve when the play group requests additional information regarding such information.

Therefore, additional interpretive input given in response to the query is likely to be more helpful and "realistic" when supplied by a secondary Game Master, for each of the player personas is individual and has different perspectives and varying abilities. Two sources will vary, and this aids in reproducing a more realistic variation in comprehension and interpretation of data, allowing the players to judge which information will serve them better.

*Force of Nature:* Set occurrences become interesting facts of RPG play in the mature campaign. Rain, snow, heat, cold, avalanche, landslide, earthquake, fire, hurricane, and tornado are obvious examples. Yet the more prosaic events are also of major importance. What about the passage of time? The direction and strength of any wind blowing is important in many ways, including its effect on arrows and other projectiles, the drift of smoke or a gas cloud, the course and speed of sailing ships, and so forth. Nature requires living things to drink, eat, and sleep. The sun rises and sets, as does the moon. Is the night bright or dark? That depends on the time, phase of the moon, and the conditions of the sky.

Serving as the Force of Nature is very much a role of record keeping and random event occurrence. It is critically important to the play of the RPG, too often neglected, and usually done by whim or guess. The Secondary GM is ideally suited to fulfill this function, and computer assistance for the Game Master or a surrogate is most useful here too. Most service in this aspect of role-playing is of the nuts-and-bolts type, unexciting, far from glamorous, but demanding and most necessary in the superior campaign.

*Personification:* The three remaining secondary areas of duty can be discussed as if they were one category. The Game Master must remember to differentiate them mentally, but the tasks are basically the same. Non-Participant Characters (NPCs) are played according to their individual professions, knowledge, skills, characteristics, ethics, and motives. Each such NPC must be role-played very carefully and dispassionately as far as the Game Master is concerned, yet not necessarily as far as the persona is considered. What constitutes the sum of the NPC character must be reflected in play, disinterestedly but faithfully, by the GM. Ally, antagonist, beggar, king, no matter. The play must suit the character and the setting.

The same is very much true for the personification of the hungry rat, the sly and evil dragon, a sentient computer, a swarm of angry bees, or whatever—these are the Other Personifications the GM

must represent. Whether the encountered persona is a talking mirror, an intelligent plant, or anything else, the Game Master assumes the role as needed and depicts the persona as best he or she is able.

Finally, the Supernatural Power role is likewise handled. It is the most demanding because of the implied potential of the persona, whether it is good, evil, or neutral, outweighing the force of the players' characters in whole, in part, or singularly. Deities, mythic creatures, and similar beings of great power require correct interaction, impartial interpretation, and dramatic representation, just as these presentation abilities are necessary in the two other portions of Personification. It is obvious that a co-GM or assistant GM is highly desirable when many such roles are needed during the course of play.

Although the three Personification interactions are given last, such activity is, in truth, very possibly the most important part of dramatizing play for such personification occurs regularly and frequently. The Master Game Master (and an understudy, protégé, or peer) shows no less than a quarter of his or her ability in this manner.

It is evident that a Game Master is *not* a party outside the role-playing arena. The GM is not a mere reader, or keeper of the rules. He is the principal force which motivates all the other participants in the RPG experience, builds their interest, sustains it, heightens the dramatic realism of the play, and actively participates in the course of a game.

The Game Master is the power above all other powers in the game, the sole and final Arbiter. He or she is also everything else in the whole entire universe of the campaign which is not played or represented by a player participant. A Master Game Master can bring about the elevation of poor and mediocre players far more easily than can a group of player participants improve the ability of an inept Game Master. The game is only as good as its Game Master in role-playing and that demands far greater skills than are called for to demonstrate masterful playing ability as a player

persona. Yet a Master GM must by definition also remain a disinterested party.

Being disinterested does not mean being aloof. It does mean being impartial, active in all aspects of participation to some degree, and very much sharing in the triumphs and tragedies of the character group after the conclusion of play. That describes the Game Master in the RPG. He or she is one-half of the whole, whether serving as an individual or with one or more co-workers in the GM role. The play group might number two or twenty, but this number never outweighs the other half. The Game Master is truly the critical element in role-playing. He or she contributes to the game and its play thereafter, while the players are concerned only with the performance of their characters.

So what is a Master Game Master? The answer is simple. The Master Game Master is one who performs all of the manifold functions noted fully, completely, and in such manner as to bring the maximum excitement and enjoyment to his player group and to himself and herself as the principal participant in the game.

### **Who Can Be a Master Game Master, or, What Is the Nature of the Beast?**

*You* can be a Master or Grand Master of Game Mastership. Compared to what it takes to gain the status of an expert GM (which we assume you have done or are well on your way to doing), there is only a small amount of effort required to attain mastery to at least a small degree. The limiting factors are not your ability and talent. Boundaries come from the limits of time, effort, and financial resources imposed by the demands of everyday life upon your activity in the RPG arena. It is thus likely that the *degree* of mastery you will be able to attain will be restricted by those boundaries.

There is another key factor. That is *desire*. The amount of desire you have will drastically affect the degree of mastery attained. With strong desire, the limiting factors which would otherwise

preclude reaching a higher degree of mastery will fall away. A Master GM must consider the limitations which pertain to the individual, and these limitations are discussed here.

Financial considerations are typically the greatest restraint on the aspiring Master GM, and possible solutions will be touched upon in Chapter 3, "Where to Begin?" Generally, however, scholastic or occupational demands must necessarily consume the greatest portion of each day's waking hours. Ironically, the group that is most active and desirous of attaining mastery happens to be the least economically able to handle the costs of doing so. RPG players are young students, by and large. The exception to this is the professional game designer, of course, but because such individuals are a minute portion of the RPG audience we won't consider them, other than to encourage all interested Game Masters toward mastery so they earn income, if not principal livelihood, from the design and authorship of role-playing games and supplementary game materials. The vast majority of GMs, however, must face the reality of pursuing their interest in "free time" as a hobby. It is therefore very important to *make every hour count*. (Hence, the use of "free time" inside quotation marks, because time that is *really* free is time that is wasted.)

Yet there still remains the dichotomy in gaming and time allotment. Student enthusiasts may have the time and can make the effort, but lack suitable resources to satisfy the financial requirements, while the older enthusiasts are usually sufficiently funded but lack time and quite often are tired and not able to put in as much effort as is needed. There are ways to better utilize time and make it more productive. Observing how people interact may lend to greater mastery of non-participant character personification. Routine and vacation experiences can be used to build the mental "library" of material for the RPG milieu with little effort. Nature and science programs on TV are excellent sources of ideas and inspiration, and most other shows are also useful for a bit of plot, drama, or comedy. Newspapers, catalogs, and all the humdrum things of life can be filed away in that mental "library" for later use in GMing adventures.

Even when you are not on “free time” there is much to be taken in which can and should be applied toward mastery. In school you are *learning* all manner of things which are applicable to games and game scenarios. Traveling to school or work and home again enables you to be *observing* others, see how they act, speak, walk, and so forth. Every game milieu has populations who will behave like the people in our real world—pay attention to them! The same thing applies to *working* situations. The actions and behavior of fellow workers, the operation of a business, group interaction, and the requirements of your particular occupation, all can be made to apply in some way or another to what goes into the RPG. After all, as Game Master you are the overseer of a whole world. There is also “free time” which is spent doing family-related activities, watching television, seeing films or plays, dining out, playing sports, traveling, and all the other things one does day-to-day, year-to-year. All you see, do, and experience has potential game application. A Master GM observes and utilizes his or her observations.

True expenditure of effort comes in putting ideas onto paper in a comprehensive, well-organized fashion. Master GMs should keep copious and orderly notes, even though time is also very much a factor in this regard. Mapping the campaign world and areas within it, keying the maps, developing campaign and scenario goals and objectives, and defining and describing the things and creatures encountered in reaching the goal all require a lot of effort and time to create and record properly.

Beyond that, polishing the whole body of work into the form needed for publication adds still more to effort and time costs. This is more time and effort than most GMs can spare, and that is typically the reason why the majority of GMs have only sketchy materials to go with their scenario maps, relying on memory and spur-of-the-moment improvisation to pull off exciting and entertaining play sessions. It also accounts for the high degree of popularity of even average and unexciting scenarios sold commercially. Time and effort reading and “customizing” modules is not so great as is required to create the same sort of adventure individually.

Also, younger GMs might hesitate to develop their own material, feeling uncertain about their qualifications to undertake such a complex and complicated task. That is best understood in relation to experience. The younger Game Masters haven't been around to observe things and understand humanity, and this is sometimes reflected in their work. Likewise, their depth of learning, knowledge, and experience isn't as great as older GMs. This is exactly the reason why I stress using all non-gaming time toward your development as a Master GM. A Master GM, regardless of age and experience, will strive to add to his or her general knowledge and understanding despite the limitations of time, by observation, reflection, and the use of recall. We all are likely to know and understand more than we might imagine. Desire to accomplish things then brings this subconscious knowledge to the surface.

Desire remains the motivating force. It should spring from an individual drive to present as fine a campaign and adventure scenario as possible. Likewise, desire extends to aspects of smaller scope: the presentation of your work, the problems posed to the players, the unique creative nature of your work—all these should be matters of pride. A high degree of desire reflects favorably on you, and adds to the enjoyment of the group. That, in turn, motivates players with a desire to excel. You are further inspired to even better GM-ing, and a synergism works to create overall continuing improvement. As this occurs, the opportunity will arise to extract the best ideas and scenarios for presentation to a larger audience, whether the forum is an amateur publication, a professional periodical, or a commercially sold product. Such publication, in turn, inspires others on a far grander scale than word of mouth or face-to-face contact ever could. This is a most desirable thing.

You have in truth evidenced desire by reading this book. That you are already expending effort, time, and money is evidenced by the fact you are a Game Master. By applying just a little more time and effort it is possible to move beyond your current level of accomplishment to a higher one. You can become a Master GM—

## WHAT IS A MASTER GM, WHO CAN BE ONE?

or perhaps you are that already, and now it is time to move on to the next stage and become a Grand Master GM. In either case, it isn't difficult, and even though you might never publish your own work for one reason or another, mastery is its own reward and the players in your group will certainly appreciate your efforts as well.





## Chapter 2



# How Is Mastery Measured?

**T**here are a number of ways to measure and assign GM Mastery. To begin with, merely being a GM means only that you are the one in charge of the campaign expression of the role-playing game system. The player participants might number two or twenty, but outside of that single group, the GM is simply one of a mass of similar principal participants who are in charge of overseeing play for their own groups.

However, the GM is an absolute monarch of a very tiny kingdom, and his rulership extends only to a very limited portion of his subjects' activities. Furthermore, his mastership is granted to him by agreement of his followers. Now we get a picture of a mere figurehead!

Worse still, where there are disputes the rebellious player or players have recourse to "higher authority." They quote chapter and verse from the RPG books that make up the rules and systems used, and thereby the majesty of the GM is threatened. In extreme

situations, these player "subjects" can even go so far as to not only leave the aegis of the GM but place similar laurels upon their own brows and try to steal away his subjects by offering them new realms in which their player personas can reside and adventure.

Obviously, then, the GM is at once a despot and a titular head, one with absolute power and whose rulership is very much owing to the consent of the "ruled."

It is possible that a GM is granted such position because his is the only game in town. That is, the player group can find no other enthusiast willing or able to assume the work load necessary to GM a campaign, or at least not one who is willing to GM a game in their favored genre or specific RPG. In such case the GM can claim "Mastery" only in its most limited sense as the one who is in charge of the campaign play. Demonstration of Master Game Mastership must be expressed in forms that extend beyond mere group acceptance.

At the other end of the spectrum stands the GM who has the most popular campaign in an area abounding with similar efforts. Individuals line up to get the chance to participate in his or her play sessions. For whatever reasons, this GM is recognized by his players as a Master GM. If other GMs in that locale also acknowledge him as "great" or "the best," then certainly his is so exceptional a campaign that Master GM status is proven and deserved. Such individuals are far rarer than are those who are "Master" GMs by default.

The vast majority of GMs are somewhere in between those two extremes, running a campaign that attracts players because it is reasonably well done, is in a genre that has appeal, uses a currently vogue RPG system, or is simply a vehicle for socialization by a group of like-minded peers. It is normal in the majority of cases to gain a new player here and there, while another drifts out of the group or moves away.

However, the awareness level of a GM should extend beyond his or her immediate locale. The greater one's knowledge of what is occurring in the whole arena of RPG activity, the higher one's degree of mastery. Social contact, regular information gained

through game hobby periodicals, convention attendance, and association with a large number of other GMs and exposure to a diversity of game systems are typical indicators of deep interest and desire to improve. That means the individual is likely to be a Master GM, but it isn't necessarily so.

Let's return to the "only game in town" for a moment. It just might be that that single little campaign is a masterful expression of the RPG system the principal participant has selected as a vehicle. The GM fulfills each and every required duty to perfection, brings new and exciting things into the campaign periodically, and dramatizes everything so well that the players can hardly wait for the next session of play and talk about what happened previously in the intervals between such adventures. The GM and players form a homogeneous whole, and the experience is such that not one of the group would decline taking part in it if an alternative was available. Here is undoubtedly a Master GM at work, but that mastery is of very limited sort. It might be that it could extend to a broader base, benefit others, but the isolation (and often self-imposed isolation in such cases) precludes the rest of us from knowing or enjoying it.

In the measurement of GM Mastery, two dimensions are most important. One is *depth*, the other *breadth*. Depth refers to the GM's ability within the specific arena of play: how well the GM knows his RPG system, handles the campaign, masters scenarios, and interacts with the player group in terms of the game and as individuals. Breadth refers to the GM's scope of activity in the field of RPG endeavors, extending to other game systems, other groups, conventions, contributing articles, writing scenarios, and designing rules, systems, games, and even game systems.

The dimension of *length* (in other words, longevity of a campaign or a GM's tenure) is far less important than the first two mentioned. The length of time spent as a GM is a factor in determining Mastery only because what needs to be learned and done can hardly be accomplished overnight. But it does not follow that the GMs with the greatest longevity are the most masterful ones. Time is the least important measure, all in all.

Depth and breadth combine to serve as principal indicators of ability, special commitment, and acceptance of the GM. As greater depth is shown to a broader audience, the degree of Mastery increases. The length of time over which Mastery is demonstrated, and the amount of contribution are indicators of a certain degree of Mastery and can actually be what brings the Grand Master GM to the fore. In general the "least" Master GM is the one who serves only his or her group, while the Grand Master GM is one who has contributed to a great number of enthusiasts over a long period of time in special or diverse ways.

It is important for Master GMs to do their best to ensure the continued vitality of the game form, its growth, and its ongoing improvement. An isolated GM may improve the degree of enjoyment experienced by his or her player group, keeping both the players and himself more ably entertained. That success will maintain the vitality of that group, but will also neglect the general vitality of the RPG form, contributing little to its growth and doing nothing to improve it.

Therefore, the additional qualifier of Mastery is the contribution toward the whole of the field, its game systems, ancillary materials, and participant population. Remember that until a large body of recognized experts in a field proclaim something as a "masterwork" or "masterpiece," the originator of the subject material cannot be recognized as a master. This is not to say that that individual isn't so, but recognition is needed to establish the fact generally and lastingly. Once this is accomplished, others in the field, including new entrants, look toward that work with admiration, find inspiration in it, and possibly seek to emulate it. The latter term is used in the sense of "to strive to equal or excel." It is hoped that those seeking to surpass a masterwork will do so, and the whole field will be broadened, improved, and otherwise have a more vital existence. Mastery in and of itself is important, and the prerequisite for that—recognition—is important too. And before a Master's work can be recognized as such, it must undergo exposure to the public. Thus, there is gain for all.

Evidence of interest in masterful Game Mastership is a step

toward attainment of that goal. Acknowledgment by the player participants you regularly GM for is one measure of Mastery. When the GM serves in convention settings as a provider of the RPG experience or as a tournament GM, and when he is acknowledged there by continued interest (demand), then Mastery is demonstrated. Likewise, when articles and game scenarios are published, the creator evidences Mastery to some degree. There is Mastery of the scenario, Mastery of systems (including roles for personas within them) and rules, Mastery of ancillary materials (playing aids and useful accessories) and Mastery of campaigns. All of these forms are basically equal expressions of Mastery, for they are defined by an established RPG framework. Separate, and certainly requiring a higher degree of Mastery, is the realm of creation of entire game systems—that is, the design, development, and authorship of an entire, original role-playing game. We can identify each stage of Mastery as follows:

1. Mastery of Game Mastership.
2. Mastery of rules (interpretation, quantification, and development).
3. Mastery of systems (interpretation, expansion, and creation—such as adding a system of political and social events to a modern RPG that did not originally have one).
4. Mastery of adventure scenario and/or ancillary materials creation.
5. Mastery of campaign milieu creation.
6. Mastery of RPG systems expansions (derived works).
7. Mastery of creation of Role-Playing Games.

As the individual GM acquires more Mastery and disseminates this Mastery to others, his or her degree of Mastery grows. The broader the audience and acceptance (appeal) the higher the degree of Mastery. It is perfectly fine to have no desire beyond being as masterful a GM as possible for your limited player participant group, but it denies the benefit to others. So in terms of the whole audience, or even that segment that is concerned with

superior GM activity for their own particular groups, Mastery isn't in evidence. The Master GM who helps other GMs to develop similar skills is demonstrating Mastery, while the one who keeps his or her knowledge limited to the confines of the group is hiding his talent.



## Chapter 3



### Where to Begin?

**M**astery begins within the Game Master. If there is a desire to excel, then it is only a matter of a little time and effort to achieve the goal in readily noticeable fashion. You have the desire, so the next step is to spend a little time and effort in critical analysis of your Game Mastering, your campaign and its component scenarios, the player group, and the rules and systems you use in your RPG. As you do this, remember the definition of a role-playing game, and refer to my first volume, *Role-Playing Mastery*, if you feel you need a refresher.

Building and maintaining a library of reference and fiction works is the first major step in the formation of a Master Game Master, and it is an unending task. This author has many thousands of volumes (and is in need of a librarian) which are supplemented periodically by old and new works. Publishers Central Bureau (Avenel, NJ) and Barnes and Noble catalogs are most useful in this regard, but there is absolutely no substitute for

periodic visits to your local book shop. When it isn't possible to purchase books, use the library, but it is strongly urged that you obtain your own copy of each and every book which you find generally useful. There are out-of-print book services which can often obtain older books, and rummage sales and library sales are a real boon to the serious GM in pursuit of building his or her library. The various Time-Life Books series are usually quite helpful for general reference and inspiration. Bibliographies in such collections are most helpful in finding further (often better detailed) source books.

Quite frankly, there is virtually no work which won't be found to be of some value to the aspiring Grand Master GM, for as orchestrator of a whole world, the RPG milieu, you have to know *everything*. Good luck! You are consigned to a lifetime of reading and research—with criticisms from those who happen to find some flaw, real or imagined, in the fabric of your creation. That too can be useful. Find their sources, peruse them, and use whatever you like. Being a Renaissance Man (or Woman) is a tough job, but someone has to do it.

Early in the creation of a campaign and game library the aspiring Master GM will encounter sizable financial considerations. The sheer time required was discussed in the previous chapter. Here, financial considerations also mean the sheer cost of purchasing materials related to gaming. Works of fact and fiction for the library which every Master GM must have can certainly run into four figures these days. Add to those costs the expenses of attending conventions and purchasing all the other materials needed for a master gamer, and the monetary limitations which might restrict your development toward mastery are easily seen.

Fortunately, students can utilize school libraries for research, and there are other ways to reduce costs. Share the purchase and ownership of games with the gaming group. The players will certainly be acquiring gaming materials on their own, so coordinate with them to avoid duplication. Ask or hint that your family and friends buy game products or useful reference books as gifts. Buy products needed at auctions whenever possible, and purchase



used books instead of new ones. Trade materials with other enthusiasts, and support your growing library in every way you can.

A good library contains periodicals as well. Consider honing your writing skills with an eye toward having articles published in RPG publications. In amateur magazines they earn free copies of the magazine, while "prozines" will typically pay sufficiently for you to cover the cost of subscription and have a fair amount of cash left over to spend elsewhere.

Once you begin to build your library, some filing system for key notes and information is necessary, whether it be the use of 3" x 5" index cards, notebooks, a computer, or some combination thereof. Note down items of interest such as settings, new or ancient cultures, scientific gadgets and any other thing that strikes your interest or inspires your imagination. Keep your notes organized according to the method you find easiest to utilize, by topic, game type, or level of interest. Regular maintenance is a must, and a good system is needed, or else information might be lost. Keep a pocket recorder or a notebook with you, and without much effort all sorts of useful information can be compiled for game use.

Next: Is there excitement and a sense of continuing wonder brought forth continually in the campaign? Does each adventure place characters in perilous situations where risks must be taken to overcome the hazards of antagonists, traps, and nature's opposition?

Now it is time to examine the RPG system utilized for your campaign. Does it meet or exceed the requirements you desire in a game system? Do you as GM understand and utilize the components of the game in proper measure and with understanding of purpose? You are aware what you must do to be a GM, and you know what an RPG should be and how each of its components serves to make it entertaining in a unique way. If the system you use fails to meet the requirements, it is actually the game? Or might it be the way you are mastering it? You can begin your mastery by working on that aspect of the RPG if shortcomings are evident.

Next comes the campaign expression of the RPG system. Again, the milieu you have devised for the player group to interact in and

with should fit the system of the RPG, with whatever modifications you and your associates have found to be desirable. If the campaign fails to meet basic RPG standards and/or the ones outlined in *Role-Playing Mastery*, you must seriously consider what to do. Would the enjoyment of the group be enhanced if the campaign were altered so as to offer all elements of the RPG model? If not, why not? These queries are particularly valid in terms of campaign longevity. Short-term enjoyment might well come from systems and/or campaigns that neglect key elements of the complete RPG, but in the long-term analysis it is not probable that they will prove viable. Hopefully, both analyses will show that all is in order.

Now examine the sagas (multi-episode play scenarios) and adventures you have for use in the campaign. Do they consider the components needed? Do they have the sense of wonder of an excellent game, the problem solving, challenges and conflicts? If they do not, it is up to you to correct the shortcomings. If so, then you are pretty sure to have a satisfied and eager group of players who look upon you a superior GM . . . maybe.

Now it is time to examine yourself. Are you fulfilling all of the roles you must as the principal participant in the campaign? If so, do you do so with enthusiasm and full application of your abilities? Go over the list of duties and then consider the nature of RPG play.

Do you allow group play? Encourage it? Do you promote all facets of the role-playing experience, including acting, use of mannerisms, change of manner (role-assumptive play by the game persona, i.e., a "play within a play") expression of traits, and exercise of character knowledge, skills, and abilities?

Is there thinking involved in the solving of problems that are posed, and is each player's creative and imaginative talent stretched thereby? At some point is there the thrill of having to combat deadly adversaries, or the possibility of losing the character to such dire opponents in one way or another?

And, finally, are there rewards to be gained commensurate with the success achieved, and is success likely? To ensure continuity, you should tailor the campaign and scenarios within it so that through good play and no more than average luck, a player's game

persona has at least a 95% chance of surviving (in some form or another suitable to that player), or else the player's interest in the campaign—and possibly the campaign itself—will be short lived.

Now go back and apply the whole directly and solely to yourself. Do you, as GM, role-play with verve? Do you convey with verve? Do you do so in the various facets given? Do you convey the wonder and excitement needed? Are your campaign's hazards in proportion to its promises, or is the play too easy or too difficult? Consider all of that. Make adjustments as needed, then work to keep the caliber of your participation high and of the new sort you've decided upon. It is very probable that at such point you have become a Master GM. Wait a bit, though, for there's more to come.

Your personal attitude toward your players, and theirs toward you, should be one of respect. That's due to each of us as individuals in the first place. Player participants will take their cue from the GM. Fun at a player's expense is a very transitory form of enjoyment. Fun because of the game is another matter altogether, and that doesn't preclude occasionally making a player or that player's game persona the butt of a joke—as long as there isn't one poor fellow that's always the goat. That's shared fun, actually. Furthermore, you can expect the players to retaliate now and again, making you the butt of their own jests. This is healthy, normal, enjoyable, and enhances the whole experience of group gaming.

All of these examinations and actions should take place before and early in the creation of a game. They are part of the series of important questions that the Master GM must continually ask himself in his quest for higher achievements. Placing the theory into practice is what should follow.



## Chapter 4



# Preparing for the Principal Role

**U**p until now, there has been precious little attention paid to the role of actual, basic GM. That is, instruction on the finer points of sitting down with a group of player participants and conducting a role-playing game play session. Frankly, the main attention of the Master GM is not fixed on this one function. Yet because the object of a role-playing game is entertainment, the art of mastering this principal role is important to every GM.

At the basic level of participation, the GM functions as the one in charge of the adventure. The play will therefore be as unique as the GM himself. Most players see no further than the campaign milieu (superficially) and the play session, because they relate to role-playing through their characters. Most do not immediately understand the many other roles of the GM or the function of the group with respect to their enjoyment. No matter—the players' understanding will grow through your efforts, and the improvement of the playing environment will transpire accordingly.

What must the GM do and be in order that he or she may rightfully claim the position of Master GM?

Preparation is the key to an exciting and satisfying play session. This applies to the GM's psychological preparation, the conceptual preparation of the material to be used, and the physical preparation of the place where the play session is to be held.

We all are aware of times when a spur-of-the-moment opportunity arose and a delightful adventure followed. You were cold, improvised most (if not all) of the scenario, and even though nothing was set up, the players still recall the session with enthusiasm. Those instances are rare. Don't rely upon their occurrence. Be prepared.

Before the play session, have the scenario ready. It must be known to you and you must visualize it in relation to the players and their game personas. Ask questions of yourself such as these: What will the group think of the material? How will they have their characters perform in the situations which will present themselves during the course of play? What will be the most likely results of the session? How much preparation will be useful before the adventure begins? Is the degree of imagination and difficulty correct? Will there be a specific conclusion? Or will it be necessary to halt at some midpoint and resume later?

Commercially available scenarios and demi-campaigns are often causes of unusual neglect in regard to preparation. They are all too often used as a stopgap measure by a desperate, incompetent, or inconsiderate GM in a way that virtually spoils the game. These are strong words, but often true. Because an RPG depends upon mutual cooperation to remain entertaining, it would certainly be inconsiderate for the principal member to haul out some module discovered in a magazine or purchased at a store and foist it off upon the players virtually unread and without that GM's creative input.

Such a GM is being lazy, uncaring, and shirking his or her responsibilities. He has given nothing to the group, and he gets nothing out of the resulting interaction. The players gain little. GMs resorting to this sort of expediency on a regular basis are

nothing more than assistants to the author/designer of the scenario used.

Any scenario not originally conceived, developed, and produced by the GM requires preparation in order to assimilate it into the campaign milieu. You must read the material from start to finish before even considering its inclusion in your milieu. If you find the material worthwhile, what about the group of players? Will they also appreciate the scenario or demi-campaign? If there are reservations, then it will be necessary for you to expend special effort to meld the work into the campaign.

Even in the best case, a fair amount of work is necessary prior to play. Go back and reread the material. There might be parts of the adventure to fill in or portions you wish to adjust to suit the needs of your campaign and players' characters. At this time you should have any maps included in the scenario handy for notation, because since you didn't create the work you won't be intimately familiar with everything in the scenario (unless you are blessed with total recall, of course). Write notes directly on the maps about what is where or what occurs where to assist in recalling the descriptive material provided. Have command of the material as if it were your own.

Beyond normal preparation is special preparation—some significant adjustment of the material to make it suitable to the campaign, the temper of the group, or to make it possible for the players' characters to operate freely and fairly within the adventure. For example, if the material was designed for a group of more powerful characters, you may need to alter the number, type, or relative danger of certain encounters. The work might be quite usable if it is altered to fit what is demanded by your group. On the other hand, you might simply decide to use only portions or certain ideas from the scenario, and disregard the rest. You might have to prepare some special material leading up to the scenario and then play it out to allow continuity in the campaign. Actual editing and rewriting of the scenario might also be required because of your own group needs.

Let's take a look at how you might accomplish this last form of

special work. For the sake of example, let us assume the material in question is a demi-campaign. Some of the material within this adventure scenario may be unsuitable because of assumptions it makes about geography, social or political circumstances, flora and fauna not extant in your milieu, and so forth. Perhaps you have modified the game's systems, or perhaps the material does so and you don't like the results. This means you will have to change the premise or substitute your own, and then go through the balance of the work and alter it according to the situations which you have substituted for those of the original creator. You have free rein to do as you like. If, for instance, the scenario material demands or merely suggests events or conclusions that are restrictive or contrary to your campaign, delete the offending material and substitute your own.

If the work is a part of a series, the impact of conflicts and differences might be proportionately greater as the series continues. A minor element excised from an early part of a series because it did not fit into an existing campaign world may become a major plot device later on in that series. Consider that carefully. You might wish to forgo using the initial material because of this, or else you might find it easier and more harmonious to work on the whole of the presentation before actually introducing any of the work as amended. The completed revision might have pages of your own work inserted, or it might be cut-up sections of the scenario pasted in place in a campaign notebook. Either way, you have correctly accepted and exercised the role and prerogative of a Master GM.

As you prepare the material for play, you must also prepare the actual playing environment. It might be picturesque and dramatic to attempt playing a horror scenario in a deserted mansion by the light of a few flickering candles, but it would probably prove quite disastrous to actual enjoyment of the game itself. Players like comfortable chairs; a space to spread out their books, paper, and dice; light to see by; a hard surface to map and write on; and occasional refreshments. The GM must see to the correct setting for players as well as the make-believe one for their characters.

Confusion, noise, interruption and distraction are things which can't be tolerated during gaming sessions. Likewise, the conditions must exist for an agreed-upon period. The play shouldn't be shorter or longer than generally expected, and the GM must control that just as he or she does all other aspects of play. Whether you do that by personally providing the environment, or it is done by arrangement, it is a prerequisite to Mastery.

The psychological preparation of a GM may be as simple as clearing the mind in order to concentrate upon the duties required, or it may be a more stringent form of discipline. Do you, in the principal role, have all of the material you will need to play? Are you confident in your understanding of the role-playing vehicle? Are you prepared to respond to any reasonable action the players might direct their characters to do? Are you fully versed in the characterization of various non-player characters or creatures which may be encountered? Are you calm, yet full of energy? All of these questions should be answered in the affirmative as the GM approaches the gaming table.

When actual interaction begins you are in control. The play session must be paced by the Master GM. The hasty character or player, the dilatory one, or the inattentive or boisterous person may or may not be in keeping with the tenor and tempo of the instant. If the play is moving too quickly, the GM slows it down by relaying additional information, improvised interposition of some entity, and so forth. If things are bogging down, the GM speeds them up with the same sort of devices. These are all things which the GM must mentally prepare for. It is a great task.

You have prepared the setting and scenario. Without seeming to be an orchestrator or dictator, you gather the players together and organize them. They will have to mentally attune themselves for play and physically be seated and prepare their records and notes for the coming adventure. If a session is to commence at 6:00 P.M., then that's when all the participants should be gathered together and ready for the game. Thoughtless players who are habitually late must be given special attention. If you can't get these individuals to come in timely fashion so as to not waste others' time, then



exclusion from the group, commencement of play without them, or some form of monetary penalty (such as having to supply refreshments) might be imposed.

Disciplinary measures can prove difficult to enforce if the tardy member happens to be the leader or one of the key members of the player group. If personal discussion of the matter does not bring good results, and the group cannot easily get along without the offending individual, you might try this tactic: determine the usual delay between the announced game time and the individual's arrival. Then (after privately telling everyone else what you're up to) announce to the group that play will begin at an earlier time from now on—earlier by about the same length of time the tardy member is usually late. If that doesn't work, try adjusting the situation so that play concludes and accolades are awarded at the start of the next session rather than at the end of the one in which the rewards were won. Either the tardy member of the group will correct his ways, or else he'll have to wait until the next play session to receive and make use of the rewards his character has earned. That method usually works quite well, although it does require a little more effort on the part of the GM.

The Master GM approaches each play session with verve. It is not just a regular event, it is a special, exciting one in which danger, excitement, fun, and adventure will prevail in an intimate and captivating manner. Your attitude, posture, tone of voice, and words all relay this to the group assembled. They are inspired, they believe, and for the time they are immersed in the mythic world thus created.

However, players in the group will not all be immersed to the same level of involvement. The eager ones tend to overshadow the less assertive members. The Master GM is careful to elicit participation to the fullest extent desired by the more introverted players while not unduly repressing the extroverts. It takes a fine sense of analysis to discover and interpret just how much participation and direct involvement is enough, for each individual is unique. One quiet player might feel intimidated and need coaxing to achieve the potential he or she is capable of, while another

reticent member might feel his or her enjoyment intruded upon if the GM attempts to involve that individual in ways which are contrary to his or her actual character and desires.

As a rule, the nature and profession or skill of the game persona, and that make-believe character's role within the team of player characters, should be measured against the actual participation of the player with the others of the group and with their personas in the game. If there is a marked diversity between these two interactive measurements, then there is need for adjustment, for the player is out of character, or the player's game persona is out of character.

Of course, a master player must assist all types of players so they may fully enjoy the game. You will recognize that. The extroverted player with an introverted character role may be intimidated somehow and an adjustment may be needed in order to allow that individual to participate fully, normally, and to his or her satisfaction. The introverted group member with a bold, powerful, and potentially leading character in the game might be trying to change and become more assertive and self-realized through interaction and contribution but unskilled in the actual behavior of a true extrovert. This may cause that player to act boldly just in the hopes of carrying the role, yet still harbor fears of rejection as a leader. Both types of players need GM assistance in order to realize full enjoyment from the game.

Consider this example of a problem regarding the interaction of a character and player: sometimes the lone individual who comes regularly hoping to be entertained but continually not finding enjoyment seems an insurmountable problem, even to the Master GM. Consider the individual in relation to the other players in the group. Perhaps the others need to participate more fully in relating to the individual and his or her game persona. They might be consciously or unconsciously slighting or excluding the person or character. If so, have a discussion with them privately to rectify the matter. If they are unwilling to try for some reason, then the person in question cannot remain a part of the group.

It is also possible that the unsatisfied character is cleverly using a "wet blanket" technique to draw attention to himself, or worse, to

disrupt the group so that participation will cease. Such an individual might dislike the entertainment form but pretend otherwise, for the sake of staying in a circle of friends. He or she might wish to be the GM but for some reason can not manage to undertake the role. He or she might also be jealous of the game or GM or both and simply not know how to handle the feelings. Resolution of the latter problem might prove very thorny, especially if the individual is otherwise a good friend or close associate of the player group and GM.

In the case of what can only be construed as sabotage tactics, have a private talk with the individual. Point out that the other members of the group all seem satisfied and would be more so if it wasn't for the actions he or she took to dampen enthusiasm. If there is subconscious desire to adversely affect the game the individual will probably either alter his behavior or exclude himself from the group. However, if there is conscious desire to subvert the entertainment, then the individual will be unwilling to cease the destructive behavior. In this event, discreet exposure of the true nature of the unrecalcitrant "spoilsport" to the rest of the players should rectify matters in short order. When it becomes evident that the individual is purposely attempting to reduce player enjoyment, they will act to force the individual to change his behavior or exclude the individual from their game society. Perhaps that individual was never interested in role-play gaming to begin with.

That last statement is an important point. The GM needs to encourage the members of the play group to accept the players' interest while reinforcing the fact that there is no need to fake continued interest if that player loses his or her enthusiasm. Friendship does not require identical behavior of interests, and a role-playing game will not affect close association or ongoing friendship.

The Master GM keeps close track of time in an unobtrusive manner. At the end of a play session it is necessary to allow time for the group to wind up their record keeping, make notes, clean up their materials, and then enjoy a discussion of what transpired during the course of the adventuring. It is tempting to extend play

beyond the period set aside for the game activity. That frequently leads to trouble. Irate spouses, worried parents, or missed appointments are the typical results. Trouble after a session lessens enjoyment—immediately for the offender, later for the others who either get “fallout” from it or miss the individual next session when he or she isn’t there.

From time to time, natural conclusions to episodes will occur. It might happen frequently or infrequently, but there are clear instances when some objective or goal has been reached, and there is a shift to accommodate another mode. One of these shifts can form a hiatus or a bridge to fresh adventure. The Master GM anticipates such shifts and accounts for them smoothly. Even as one goal has been reached and the players are congratulating themselves on a job well done, the Master GM is planting seeds which will grow into the next epic quest which awaits.

The attitude of the group over the preceding two or three sessions will give the Master GM a clue as to which course he or she should follow when directing activity after a conclusion comes. Is the enthusiasm and excitement at a peak so that the player group is primed and ready for the next portion of the mythic quest? Was the last adventure so harrowing and exhausting that they are in need of some comic relief, or simply some “personal adventuring”? The stages of an epic, player reaction and interaction with the scenarios therein, and the concluding portion of the scenario, direct the astute GM in the proper course.

Take the EPIC OF YARTH product, NECROPOLIS, which I recently wrote and is soon to be published. The work is a FRPG demi-campaign which can serve as a basis for an expanded campaign if the GM milieu allows for a semi-historical Egypt (“Ægypt”). The events leading up to the first scripted interactions in the work are purposely left vague, so that the GM can slip over the area and get into the adventure or else develop play in the period which introduces the material contained in NECROPOLIS. Next, familiarization with the land, people, and its deities is accomplished through role-playing in a hamlet surrounding a military-garrisoned caravanserai. Encounters generally are of a

social sort with some limited hostilities included to keep action in the sessions.

The second stage of adventuring includes some outdoor action and then indoor adventuring in a temple and its underground. This requires great concentration. Upon completion of that portion, the GM is given a choice. He may allow a bit of exploratory adventure to enable the players to build their stamina back to the point where they can face a truly harrowing climax in a tomb setting, or he can move play to the tomb immediately. If the group needs some preparation, then there is plenty of room within the material provided to use creative Mastery and provide for as much as is necessary to assure that the culmination is properly handled.

When the final episode is completed, the GM has a selection of options. The characters can be whisked away to their own locale through magical means, or they can follow a route which will bring them into an adventure with nomads as they cross desert terrain. The players can be offered a jungle setting if they seem interested, or a whole campaign can be established with the characters (at least initially) being honored minions of Pharaoh and his officials. The variety is wide, for the needs of the GM and the players too are contemplated. No course is fixed, for only the GM knows which route is appropriate. In fact none of the provisions contained in the work might be suitable. The Master GM will know exactly what to do. Northwards, down the Nylle (Nile) River is the sea and the civilizations of Greece, Rome, and others. Eastwards is Yarbay (Arabia) and beyond Hind (India). To the south are the velds and jungles of Affrik (Africa), and westwards both desert and the non-earthly sea which exists in the milieu where parts of Libya and Algeria are in reality. None of these might do, and perhaps something totally unexpected is the best answer to the question, "Where does the adventure take us next?"

It isn't possible to address the specifics of scores of games, let alone the hundreds of thousands of campaign expressions of these Role-Playing Game vehicles. Yet the principals of masterful GM-ing apply to all, and in the final analysis the Master GM is everything to everyone within the play group of the campaign, and

nearly as complete when it comes to mastering play for those not so intimately involved. The more you GM, the greater the scope of your knowledge and ability, the more masterful your exercise of the role. But not everyone can manage all aspects, and it is necessary to consider the major areas of shortcoming and suggest remedies which might facilitate attainment of mastery or a higher degree of it.



## Chapter 5



# The Master Milieu: Design and Maintenance

**B**efore structuring a series of interconnected adventures within a single larger milieu, it is necessary to take a close look at the RPG system you are ready to use. Is your RPG choice the right one for you and the players? If everyone is interested in the genre and generally satisfied with the systems and rules contained within the game vehicle, the answer is probably "Yes, we have the best RPG for us." If the game itself suggests that you must or should devise a fair proportion of the systems and rules for yourself and the players, perhaps you need to find another game.

No, that doesn't mean you need to change your campaign—not much anyway. If you can, find a more preferable game containing a base system of rules and procedures to cover the principal aspects of the type of game you wish to construct. Just make sure that the game is in general use by other RPG enthusiasts, and is still in print. It will give your group more homogeneity in the community at large, and it will not disturb the continuity of the campaign.

Those parts of the original system which are desirable can be retained for as long as you and the players find them useful.

When you are preparing a campaign, consider any player dissatisfaction which had appeared before. Are there limits imposed upon the campaign by the game you will be using? If there are restrictions on what can be done or role-played, and the players seem interested in breaking free of such restrictions, the game could be in need of change. Or, the problem might be rooted in the players, if their expectations are naive or otherwise unreasonable.

Let's take a look at an example. You have an AD&D campaign. You can use the game vehicle, albeit with considerable difficulty, to cross into other genres for variation. You have extensive rules and complete systems for operating within the fantasy genre, and there is ample supplemental material and scenarios to assist you in your milieu management. The players, however, seem to chafe at restrictions against multi-classed humans and limitations on elves in regard to their level of advancement. In fact, they want to remove all restriction of weapon use too. Should you allow this in order to assure the campaign remains vital?

Unless you wish to change the central nature of your game, the answer is a resounding "No." A "class-level" character advancement system is used in the AD&D game rather than a system of skill acquisition. The precept here is specialization. Nobody can know everything, or be good at everything. In fact, only exceptional individuals can be *very* good at *anything*! Removing restrictions would allow characters to grow to levels of power entirely out of balance in the whole of the system and to move into realms beyond—something on the order of comic book superheroes, perhaps. By all means move to such a comic book RPG if that's where you and the others will have greater fun, but don't try to transform the FRPG you have into that vehicle. It's much the same as trying to use a pair of pliers for a hammer or a screwdriver for a crowbar. Select an appropriate game for immediate satisfaction and for long-term use.

When designing your campaign, strive to capture the enthusiasm that a group has when immersed in role-playing for the first



time, but make sure to use all of the higher elements of structure as well. Ask questions of yourself concerning your plans for the campaign. How do the mythic elements fit into your milieu? Is there some overriding purpose behind all that transpires in the "world"? Are there sub-plots and microcosmic reflections of the grand conflict and parallel oppositions?

If your campaign deals with "events which are beyond grand events," then the whole of a single conflict might be but one theater, front, or battle in a larger, cosmic contest between opposing factions. The microcosmic campaign might deal with a global war, for example, in terms of one nation's involvement and the consequences of its decisions. The larger picture would concern the fate of the world and all of the nations involved. In either case you must consider both the macrocosmic and the microcosmic, albeit the terms will have definitions that vary from one set of precepts to the other.

What is meant by all this is that your campaign must consider the grand scheme, possible futures, and the present as a product of past events. In time travel or probability travel play even the past is mutable and thus the present might be made to shift. Everything is tied to the player characters' interaction with the campaign.

Whether the personas are operating in the past, present, or future, the players must eventually realize that their characters in the campaign will affect the milieu by their actions. Here are the steps by which a Master GM can assert his or her direction firmly upon the campaign.

1. Assure harmony between the RPG genre and systems and the campaign milieu, so that players do not become confused between what they understand from the game vehicle and the play of the campaign. In some cases, this may mean instructing your players in any rule modifications you have made.

2. Establish a past, present, and likely future for the game milieu as directed in general by the RPG or at the GM's discretion if the game system does not give any direction in this respect.

3. See that the milieu of the campaign has purpose as well as a framework in which random events occur. There must be vast,

cosmic, greater, intermediate and lesser schemes (the microcosmic descending toward the microscopic in gradual circles). Determine at which level you will begin the scenario and consider how the player characters may discover or explore the others.

4. Be sure that logic of some sort, either general or game-oriented, exists within the milieu, and that this logic must direct the course of events beyond the scope of player character interaction. The world must function and change without requiring the player characters to constantly direct it. Life will go on when they are not looking, which will ensure variety and sustained interest in the scenario.

5. Structure events and connections between them so that player actions have a ripple effect, with definite influence on the other factors in the world—but the ripples should disappear at a reasonable point in the overall scheme. Some action taken on a microcosmic level will not necessarily affect the macrocosm at the other extreme, and vice versa.

6. To ensure the continuity of the campaign, build in both continuity of logic and purpose. The GM maintains the game as an entertainment form for all participants, but if it lacks continuing purpose in its play aspects, it fails to be vital.

7. Do everything possible to guarantee continuity of participation by players and their game personas. For obvious reasons, this is of considerable importance to the vitality, realism, and enjoyment of the campaign.

Think of your campaign as many-layered, with the image of an onion a good one to bear in mind. Neophyte characters begin seeing their surroundings as a vast sphere in which they randomly operate for whatever personal purposes or reasons they desire, with little or nothing underlying or overlaying these individual purposes. At this stage, they are operatives. Each acts with free will, or possibly by some higher direction, but all are “in the field” doing things.

Perhaps you have a so-called non-ecological setting. In a fantasy campaign, this means there are creatures and things in places where there is no apparent reason for them to be, no reasonable

means to support their existence. In a science-fiction campaign, it might mean there are races of aliens friendly or hostile to humankind, and the alliance of warfare has no discernible foundation. You can determine for yourself if your campaign happens to fall into such a category.

There is no credit or blame due to such settings. If they provide immediate entertainment they are, in fact, laudable. In an exercise of total make-believe, who is to say that one form of pretend is more valid than another? Nobody can rightly say anything of the sort. They can, though, point out their personal inability to believe in something. That is valid.

It would, of course, be a relatively simple matter for the Master GM to return to such a setting and establish rationales for the existence of the seemingly impossible, improbable, incongruous, or illogical aspects. Your player participants will tell you when it is time to do so.

Then again, you might have set up a campaign milieu with established game realities. Even so, you can feel comfortable throwing in a "fun house" adventure now and then, allowing the "realities" of your milieu to flex or warp according to whim. The general point is that in either campaign, the player characters operate at a relatively unsophisticated level in a vast (and to them basically unknown) multiverse. They must be allowed to interact on many levels.

Recalling always the mythic adventure (See Appendix B, Out of the Mundane, for a detailed exploration of that storytelling structure), you will devise or include scenario after scenario of adventuring for the group. At some point, the players and their characters will become more able than before. Then, the next layer of the milieu has been penetrated. Rather than unrelated or individual foes, player characters might now have to combat organizations or super-powerful antagonists. The next step beyond that will be a combination of the latter two, perhaps, the organization and super-powerful enemies with some benefit or penalty accruing for success or failure which is beyond the immediate setting. However,

through those stages the player characters are still operatives. The characters are still "in the trenches," albeit the fighting may be more intense and their abilities to conduct the struggle greater.

The point here is this: the role-playing game requires that its player participants have basically operative roles throughout the life of the campaign. It is the GM's role to play the managers and directors who control the activities of the operatives, at least on the grandeur scale. There must always be that grandeur scale, something above and beyond the place where the player characters are, or else there is no longer any purpose to play. This is the main reason that the Master GM doesn't award progress too rapidly. It happens to simulate actual life, but that is a secondary rationale. In fact, withholding awards keeps the campaign expression of the RPG vital. When there is no longer any advancement to be made, the campaign is over. It is as if one player in a MONOPOLY game has acquired all of the properties. It's then time to begin a new game—simple enough to do with a board game, but not with a role-playing game. After all, how many campaigns do you have the time or desire to build?

The master player is as aware of the need for a character to remain an operative as the Master GM. Such players will willingly "retire" any character too powerful for the scope of the campaign, provided there is excitement and purpose in the development of a new character, and that this retirement and fresh persona routine doesn't occur frequently.

When a campaign gains longevity and the roster of past and present characters becomes more diverse, the Master GM is able to bring varying levels of mythic adventure into play. New characters will be operating at one of the lower "layers," characters who have been in play longer operate at a higher one, and from time to time the "retired" ones are recalled into action to venture forth against some ultra-powerful foe who would otherwise obliterate the less powerful characters.

In such an arrangement, each player may have two or three characters of varying degrees of moderate power who are routinely

called upon to adventure in the campaign's scenarios. Occasionally, when you have some special scenario prepared, the more potent, retired, characters are called forth to operate.

Allow me to illustrate this concept by using a fictional character of mine, Gord of the Gord the Rogue stories. He might have been an AD&D game character, but he was not. Some of the others with whom he interacted in novels and short stories were, however. His progress from relative powerlessness to master thief fills the pages of four novels. There are noticeable stages where his activity changes from being self-directed to being directed by a higher force. Eventually, he has grown so powerful that his associates are quasi-deities and his direction comes from deities. Of course his foes are comparably more evil and potent too.

At last he accomplishes the goal of the whole epic. The mythic quest is complete, and Gord "retires" to a position of great power and scope of direction. In this capacity he might appear again only as a shadowy figure far beyond the realms of the less powerful operatives who are the protagonists of other adventure yarns, or else he might reappear as the principal character in a story which involves cosmic events.

The campaign should be anchored in an overall scheme of things, subsuming some ultimate goal that the opposing forces seek or avoid. There are objectives to be met along the way, events and accomplishments that are attainable and measurable when attained. You introduce players to the RPG and they learn how to play. Their characters grow in power as the players attain increased playing skill. You then introduce some minor goal through a planned scenario. The players make preparations, set the objectives for their characters, and by stages achieve these marks of progress. At the end of the epic adventure a larger goal is reached. The players have learned, their characters are more powerful, and you can now introduce a fresh quest.

So it goes, onward and upward, toward an ever greater scheme, an ultimate goal which can never be reached—for if that occurred, the campaign would cease to exist. There must always be a higher mountain to scale, a wider sea to cross, a deeper cavern to explore.

There is, obviously, a certain sameness inherent in adventures of less than cosmic scope. There is a sameness in life too, if we choose to see it this way. As a Master GM, you avoid apparent repetition and the resulting boredom through two devices. Varying the spectacle that surrounds the quest is the first and most common device to be employed. The setting, the antagonists, and the object of the quest can be varied to make the adventure quite different in all apparent respects from its predecessors, except that it is plotted in the usual way. The second device is to step out of the mythic theme once in a while for relief. Whether this means a comic episode, one which is simply random in nature, adventure in exotic places, of exploratory sort, or non-adventure, is not important. The object is to relieve the players of the routine and to break the sense of continuing spirals upward toward an unattainable goal.

All of the foregoing notwithstanding, continuity is very important—especially important in regard to the long-term viability of the RPG campaign. Player participants must devote considerable time and effort to create and develop their characters. During this developmental period, a time which might stretch from four or five game sessions to more than twenty, players learn about the game system, the basics of the campaign, the demands of the GM, group dynamics, and their game personas.

Experienced players will require fewer play periods than will neophytes to role-playing gaming, of course. Nevertheless, some period of development is required, and considerable time and effort too. The greater the detail given by the GM, the more stress on personification of characters and role-playing, the greater the time and effort required from players. The greater time and effort the players devote to their personas, the more superior the overall gaming experience.

Therefore, the superior role-playing game offers players continuity of play through the following devices:

1. Avoidance of "fatality" through some form of "luck" or magic.

2. Return from "death" or similar state through resurrection, cloning, reincarnation, and/or replication.
3. Replacement of the "dead" character by a sibling, other family member, or associate.

In any or all of these ways, some degree of continuity is assured, provided the frequency of loss of player characters is not greater than the frequency with which these continuity devices can be employed. For instance, if the rules of a game decree that one character can be reincarnated every month of game-time, but in your campaign characters are "dying" at the rate of one every two weeks, then you will have a continuity problem due to the high mortality rate. A high mortality rate can stem from a flaw in the rules, the campaign, or the scenario, or a shortcoming in player ability. The GM can correct all but the last flaw.

It is typically an easy matter to adjust rules or systems within a RPG which tend to disrupt continuity of character participation. The PARANOIA game, for instance, is better than its rules, which encourage (mistakenly in my belief) too great a mortality rate and limited continuity through clone substitution. Even though the game also encourages player character hostility through various means (from rewarding one character for the "death" of another to creating divisiveness of character goals through having each character be responsible to different loyalty bases), the GM can rectify the matter quickly by rules modification if he deems it desirable to utilize the game for long-term play. By directing the occurrence of hazards to areas outside of the group of player characters, placing perils likewise, and allowing character risk-taking to account for most of the other "fatality" situations, the whole game system can be turned from anti-longevity to one where the continuity of characters is assured.

A flaw in the campaign can be as common a situation as player character mortality. Actually, it is often as big a problem in the reverse—that is, characters are so powerful or well protected that they never or hardly ever encounter "life threatening" situations. Whichever aspect of the problem exists, the Master GM under-



stands the need to solve it and knows how to adjust some facet of the campaign's workings to produce an acceptable mortality rate. This holds true for scenario excess, too. The masterful GM familiarizes himself with the material to be used prior to exposing the player characters to the adventure. By altering the severity of the hazards or changing the effectiveness of provisions to offset player character demise, the material is easily adjusted to suit the needs of the player participant group.

The AD&D module TOMB OF HORRORS is a useful example in this respect. It is designed for very skillful players with moderately high-level characters. With assistance from non-player characters, increased magical aids, a "training" scenario used before play actually begins, or successive "assaults" on lesser targets, less able player groups can successfully complete the scenario. To foist this scenario on unskilled players or players whose characters are not powerful enough to withstand the hazards of the TOMB OF HORRORS is to invite dissatisfaction, if not worse.

Lastly, let's discuss the player who seems unable to keep a character "alive" for any length of time. This is a potential GM problem, even though he or she may not be to blame for this inability. Do the repeated "deaths" of that one player's characters disrupt play for the others? If so, perhaps the player is one who seeks disharmony in the group and uses the seeming ill-luck or lethality of the scenario to cause trouble. If this is the case, get rid of that player.

Perhaps the player is just not skilled, and possibly he or she never will gain the skill necessary to assure continuity of their characters. However, if this doesn't affect the group's enjoyment and the player is happy enough with the situation, then there is nothing which needs to be done.

But if the player is discouraged because of the high mortality rate of his characters, then you should attempt to assist this individual outside the arena of the game. Spend time giving the individual tips on how superior play is managed. Perhaps one or more of the other players might work with the individual to improve his or her skills. Master players can cope with a "klutz" in the group, compensating



accordingly when they realize the existence of the problem and its continuing nature. This can actually add zest to the adventuring and provide comic relief all in one. On the other hand, a player unable to meet the standard of the group might disrupt the enjoyment of the other players enough to cause them to become dissatisfied with the situation. If that occurs, then the player must be removed in order to retain the vitality of the campaign.



## Chapter 6



# Mastery and Modification of Rules and Systems

**W**ith a complete understanding of the entire role-playing game, its purpose and objectives, and the various parts which give it motive power, you are now equipped to make a critical analysis of any portion you choose. Knowing the form and function, from the nuts and bolts referred to earlier to the completed whole, the rules, systems, and campaign, you have the expertise to add, remove, or change whatever you wish in any manner you deem appropriate.

It is usually the players who will question the rules of a game, suggest change, and seek variation from established systems. Frequently, however, the players' desires to modify the RPG are based on some imagined or real advantage their game personas will gain through the proposed change. In this regard, your understanding of the objectives of the design—realism, playability, game balance, continuity, scope, adaptability, and completeness—will assist you in your examination and judgment of suggestions from the group.

Similarly, your own ideas regarding rules or systems will be based on your knowledge of the whole, so that you will not erroneously or inadvertently upset the functioning of the whole intricate game by "correcting" some part which is, at least in the opinion of your group, not as well crafted as the remainder. The major advantage gained is the ability to make authoritative statements regarding the whys and wherefores of the whole, handle creative interpretations of the game's rules and systems, create new rules, develop new systems, and occasionally change things to suit the needs and perspective of you and your player participants. Let's take a moment to define *rule* and *system*.

A *rule* is a law which states how something can or cannot be done. Instructions typically set forth the rules. *Rules systems* relate to distinct but related rules which develop a complete portion of the game. For instance, there are rules regarding the use of weapons in combat, rules to determine if the weapons so used are effective, rules to establish the damage inflicted by effective weapon use, and so on. The entire body of material pertaining to combat is the rules system for combat.

A *system* is the major concept and all of the dependent ideas which form the whole of one aspect of a game. This may indicate a series of interconnected rules which are vital to the playing of the RPG, such as a combat system, or a magical system. But there are also many systems in RPGs which are not mandatory and have no rules *per se*. For instance, a system which is presented as a method of determining random events does not present rules, but if it is used and an encounter is indicated, there will be rules within the overall rules system for that occurrence. A Master GM must be familiar with the construction of rules and charts before he or she is ready to modify existing systems or create one of their own.

A sample combat system utilized might be based on the concept of bell-curve results. There are at least two "given laws" in any combat system. The first is that, except for "sitting duck" or "fish in a barrel" situations, no attack will unfailingly strike its intended target. The second is that the effects of a successful attack striking the intended target will never be uniformly the same. Now let's

examine a method which applies these laws and uses the bell curve as its system basis.

Using two 6-sided dice added together gives 36 possible combinations and a bell-shaped results curve going from a low score of 2 (1/36th chance) to a high of 12 (1/36th chance) with 11 possible totals, i.e., 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12. Let us now assume that the two 6-sided dice are to be used to determine hit probability, and that a well-trained individual utilizing a particular weapon against a standard target will form the average probability of success when employing the weapon. Let's say that is a little under 40%, so a 9, 10, 11 or 12 indicates the target is hit by the weapon (10 chances in 36, or 27.8%).

The system now postulates the following: There is a point beyond which added training brings diminishing returns. This is only logical, and is reflected in this sample RPG by a system of charts indicating a type of ability rating for the player characters. Let's set up a table showing weapon-use proficiency and then put in place the conclusions of the postulate.

<i>Score of 2d6</i>	<i>Chance of this score or less</i>	<i>Ability of User (Must meet or be less than this score to hit)</i>
2	1/36	Untrained and unfamiliar with use of weapon
3	3/36	Untrained but familiar with principles of weapon
4	6/36	Moderate training and familiarity with weapon
5	10/36	Well-trained and familiar with weapon
6	15/36	Well-trained veteran used to employing weapon in combat
7	21/36	Expert with continual practice and total familiarity with weapon
8	26/36	Master
9	30/36	Past Master

10	33/36	Grand Master
11	35/36	Consummate Master
12	36/36	(Beyond the realm of human possibility)

To reflect the diminishing-returns aspect of training, each step upwards costs a number of "training factors" equal to the difference between the ability levels, and gained through successful use of the skill in question (in this instance, use of a specific weapon). Assuming each individual has a starting point of 2 (untrained and unfamiliar), the cost of acquiring a hit probability of 3/36ths (3 or under) is 2 factors, 6/36ths (4 or under) requires 5 total factors, or an additional 3 when moving from "Untrained" to "Moderate," and so forth, with no possibility of having a greater than 35/36ths chance to hit. The bell shape of this probability curve makes training very useful and increases sharply the probability of success through 7, the increase of "Well-trained Veteran" to "Expert" status yielding the largest single gain on the chart. Thereafter, the curve declines.

If this same concept were used with three 6-sided dice, the bell shape of the probability curve would be rather more marked at its ends, but the overall probabilities would not be very different if care was used in placing the benchmarks.

Now, let's examine the second "given law." Results of a successful hit using a weapon will vary from case to case. Again we will utilize 2d6. Here is the table of results which might be generated:

*Score of 2d6    Result to Living Target Struck by Weapon*

2	No appreciable damage inflicted, no effect
3	Incidental wound, no activity until next combat sequence, ignore effect thereafter
4-5	Slight wound, no activity until next combat sequence, incur 1 factor toward disablement
6-8	Light wound, no activity until next combat sequence, incur 2 factors toward disablement

- |      |   |
|------|---|
| 9-10 | Moderate wound, no activity for 2-12 combat sequences, incur 4 factors toward disablement   |
| 11   | Heavy wound, no further combat possible, incur 6 factors toward disablement   |
| 12   | Mortal wound, no further combat possible, incur 8 factors toward disablement, death occurs in 2-12 combat sequences unless medical attention is given |

This table subsumes that the target will have "disablement factors" (in some systems called "structural damage capacity" or "hit points") between 2 and 12, with the game personas having between 7 and 12 ( $d6 + 6$ ) to give them an advantage on the average. Also subsumed is death occurring whenever disablement factors exceed the total possessed by the persona in question. Applying the law of diminishing returns, the cost of increasing disablement factors might be based on the number to be gained, i.e., to go from 7 to 8 costs 8 factors while 9 costs 9.

A Master GM must be able to consider the whole of the system concept before preparing to modify or add to older rules or create new ones. The ideas which follow from the system concept may be plain to a casual reader, but what's not considered may be all the things which follow its extrapolation. For example, will the condition of a character employing a weapon vary probabilities according to particular situation? Probably. For instance, a man running and trying to discharge a weapon would have a reduced likelihood of successfully hitting the target. What about the target? Will movement, concealment, armor, and similar considerations reduce the probability of being hit? Probably. There is also some likelihood that certain defenses will reduce the amount of effectiveness of a hit. So, in the sample system above, the dice roll to find the result of a successful hit would be modified downward by the effect of the defense.

However, when these things are added to the equation, we begin to reduce playability as we increase the amount of realism. As previously noted, too complex or complicated a system of any sort

will raise the simulation level toward realism but reduce playability. It will dispel the suspension of disbelief because of the time and detail demanded, and will likely detract from all other aspects of the game as an entertainment vehicle. The correct balance between realism and playability is very much a matter of group taste, but there is a median level beyond which the vast majority of enthusiasts lose all desire to participate. Master GMs must be able to discern the proper level of realism and complexity for both their milieu and their players.

Now let's take a look at another type of rule which might be constructed in order to make the system function. We start out by stating the principle behind the rule: nobody can normally have a 100% probability of success with a weapon. However, lack of defense (the sitting duck principle) or some special function of the weapon (such as a computer-assisted sighting and tracking devices in a Science Fiction RPG) might give over 100% probability. Therefore, keeping in mind the basic principle, yet allowing for special circumstances, any chance to hit which exceeds 100% will be stated in whole numbers added to 12 but considered as single integers, i.e., a 14 equates to +2. Therefore, the rule might be that each factor over 12 in chance to hit is added to the dice roll to discover the results of the hit.

Similarly, we might create a rule which states that armor does not affect the chance to be hit but modifies results of the hit favoring the target. Because of the intimate knowledge available about modern weapons, their use, and the damage inflicted by hits, the combat system can be made more detailed, highly complicated, and a degree of realism achieved which is startling to the uninitiated and quite distasteful to most sane human beings.

This is not so true when it comes to simulating combat with primitive weapons. There are no documents regarding medical studies of wounds inflicted by Roman pilums, for example, or detailed accounts of what occurs when a trebuchet was loaded with a hundred one-pound rocks and discharged against living creatures in the open. Much supposition must be employed, al-

though extrapolation of modern information will offer a fair degree of credibility.

The same is true regarding the effects of armor. Does one assume that medieval armor reduced probability of being successfully hit, hit at all, or does the shielding material absorb damage? Some of each. The DUNGEONS & DRAGONS game assumed that only the "to be hit" probability was reduced, and when I wrote AD&D I followed this same system, for it sprang from the progenitor of both games, the CHAINMAIL rules for medieval miniatures combat. It was decided that allowing other concepts to affect the system would increase the complexity of an already complicated system. However, there is merit to considering the other effects of wearing armor.

For example, medieval armor would certainly tend to slow movement, such as reaction speed and the wearer's ability to attack. On the other hand, players won't find it desirable for the GM to apply rules concerning these restrictions unless the application is more punitive to antagonists than it is to player characters. Therefore, the rules may consider a system where mages and thieves in particular might stand to benefit, and fighters would suffer, so players could disagree with lesser aspects of the rules rather than the entire system.

Other rules which can be applied to the use of armor are convenient examples of the types of considerations which are vital to the understanding and possible modification of any existing system. For instance, armor could reduce the probability of a weapon hitting successfully. That is reflected in some game systems already. But it can also reduce weapon effects by precluding a successful hit, i.e., one which causes damage to the wearer. In fact, such effects are considered in the basic value of armor usage. And what about armor absorbing damage? That point has some degree of validity. Absorption of damage, however, requires keeping records of damage absorbed, relative state of armor, repair rules, replacement facilities, rules governing magical protections, and so forth. It also requires a careful comparison of weapon to armor



and even more record keeping, and the GM is going to bear the brunt of it, including checks to see that player record keeping is proper and accurate. Remember that a Master GM should be able to achieve realistic results with an economy of systems and rules and trappings.

As another example, let's consider weapons. Weapons tend to fall into three broad categories: piercing, cutting, and impact weapons, which are best exemplified by an arrow, an axe, and a mace. Okay, now let us see what might happen to one wearing chain mail when attacked by each type of weapon. Note the level of complexity each example serves to illustrate. The Master GM who hopes to master rules and systems should be familiar with these concepts.

An arrow will pierce chain mail without doing significant damage to the armor. Ergo, it inflicts damage directly. Thus, a special rule is required, for the possibility of penetration of mail links and underpadding. What if a shield is added to the equation? The same considerations lead to the same conclusions.

The spear used to stab is another good example of a piercing weapon. It will damage armor slightly more, and if stuck fast in a shield absolutely ruins the effectiveness of the latter. What about a sling bullet? A lead missile tapered at both ends and slung with strength and skill can perforate shield and armor. It also has shock (impact) damage, just like a bullet from a firearm. More rules and special records would be needed.

The axe is going to have most of its effect absorbed by armor. There will also be some fair amount of impact in a solid blow, but we'll translate that easily enough by having one-half damage go to the armor, one-half to the wearer. Now, however, we must determine if the axe next strikes a new place in the armor or roughly the same one as before. No? Just have the armor keep absorbing damage until it "falls off," you suggest? Then what about separate attacks against the same individual, each attack using a different type of weapon? The archer will insist he or she is aiming at the rent in the mail, as will a spearman. More rules, for the sake of the realism, are needed, because you are now encouraging aimed

attacks rather than general ones; specific damage rather than overall hits. Corollary rules for special effects when a specific portion of a target is successfully attacked could fill a dozen pages!

A mace is an impact weapon. When it strikes mail it might cause some of the linkages to burst from strain, but basically the force of impact will be transferred through mail and padding to the body beneath. Okay. So say only one-quarter of the damage from an impact weapon will be absorbed by armor. What's one-quarter of 2? 3? 5? 6? It goes on. It gets worse too. Shield absorption of damage is more easily handled, with 1 point for the user and the balance of the damage accrued by the shield, for instance, being an easy and fair rule to come up with. But consider all of the circumstances outlined above. Master GMs and would-be game designers must.

Modifications to remove complications which seem to generate realism can be made to make the system wieldy and less time consuming, but every system or rule added, or merely expanded, requires adjustments up and down the line of game parts to assume harmonious functioning everywhere.

For example, an "absorption of damage" rule for armor fairly cries aloud for the addition of specific hit location and special damage. This is reinforced by the example of an axe striking a shield—surely the one-half damage accruing to the shield-bearing individual must be on the arm which holds the shield, or possibly to some portion of the body against which the shield is held or is driven from the force of the blow.

And hit location and special damage require a careful reworking of damage considerations. How much damage can an area withstand? Can a special hit actually negate the area without regard for its general ability to withstand accrual of damage? How are factors assigned? How is damage repaired or healed?

Because you are a master you know the whole of the game, its systems, and the many rules which enable the systems to operate. You must now trace the effect of a change in a rule to the working of the system, the change of a system to a rules system and throughout the game. No portion of the operating systems of a

game functions in isolation. What results from a change in one place must be traced throughout the whole to determine the results. You must also evaluate the work involved and compare it to the value of the change you are contemplating. Only you may determine whether all this is really worth it.

Additions of *function* influence systems and rules too. Let's assume that a character class or skill is a function within a game system. If you add functions not considered in the rules, then you must carefully go through the entire RPG system to adjust the workings so as to accommodate the special function added. Refer to UNEARTHED ARCANA to see just how extensive a process this is. The "Barbarian class" required a great deal of addition and fine-tuning to accommodate it smoothly into the AD&D game system, but it was a veritable piece of cake when compared to the addition of a new type of magic-use, for example. Magic use requires a system of power distribution, an analysis of magical abilities and limitations, and a level of consistency with the existing rules system. Care must be taken with respect to game balance. (Realism is an obvious consideration too, but no Master GM would allow inclusion of some absurd or anachronistic function—whether a character, skill, or meaningful operation of general sort such as gunpowder or the combustion engine in a game set in the early medieval period.)

Adding a skill which is all-purpose and basically aimed at getting around all barriers to success is exactly what immature or unthinking players will urge. "This Universal Panacea" skill (such as '*Jack-of-all-trades*') is great!" they say earnestly. Of course, with little expenditure they can then tackle virtually anything with some reasonable hope of success. This is not only unrealistic, but game balance is forever tilted to favor the player character who has this skill. Challenge will quickly slide away. "I'll use my Universal Panacea skill to attempt lifting that mountain," and that's the end of the line for the RPG campaign . . . and the game in general if it is in the rules.

Game balance must come ahead of all things, even realism. If

more (or less) realism is demanded, then the whole of the game balance must be adjusted to accommodate the new realism factor.

When considering some change, use the campaign vehicle to isolate the factors. Set the change to occur only in a selected portion of your campaign and only for a limited period of time. In this way, you will see how the change influences the game, and the changed game impacts the campaign. For example, you create a situation where the new rule can come into play: "In the Land of Ooblahdee you discover a venerable sage who instructs you in the art of Oration. You learn it so thoroughly that you now have  $n\%$  chance of convincing any creature able to understand your speech that your suggestions are worthy of consideration." You are adding a persuasive skill to your campaign, possibly other skills as well. By allowing the group to acquire the skill(s) and use them in a controlled environment, you can judge what will eventuate when the concept is applied throughout the campaign milieu, including skill use by non-player characters and other intelligent life forms. If the result is acceptable, it can then be added to the rules of the RPG as a variant, and you have the task of seeing to its full and complete application throughout the game and campaign. If it is unacceptable, then the moment the players depart the selected area all of the variant conditions disappear.

Knowledge of this sort not only enables you to create changes as you deem desirable, but it also enables you to assess the suggestions of others which pertain to some change and discard those which are obviously ill-conceived or improperly thought out. The deadly martial arts character akin to Remo Williams is appropriate only to very fanciful expressions of the fantasy genre or the comic-book-hero milieu, but the ability of martial arts skill is certainly a realistic addition to most RPGs in some form or other. The greater your mastery of rules and systems, the easier it is for you to examine and select right changes from those which are wrong for the game system or your campaign.



## Chapter 7



# How to Master the Adventure Scenario

**E**very GM devises adventures for the group, and he or she must continue to do so in order to retain the vitality and integrity of the campaign. Some utilization of commercially published materials helps to meet the demands of the player group for new and different challenges, and the GM could even use some amateur and semi-professional scenarios occasionally without detriment to the campaign.

Every GM would like to do better in this area, and probably every Master GM has a secret ambition to publish his or her best work, too. That's natural! The great scenarios are fun to design and write, fun to play, and fun to talk about afterward. Think of the added attraction of getting paid for that! Exposure is exciting too, especially the first time your name is in print. Professional and semi-professional publication will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 10. Here, we will concentrate on how to construct an adventure scenario which is entertaining and challenging.

It is important to firmly establish your primary audience. Any adventure scenario is written for only one basic audience type. Your audience is every other GM using the specific RPG or with a campaign in the genre, unless you author a non-game-specific work. Your audience will appreciate the structure of the product which can come only from great familiarity and reliance on a system of rules. They will also identify the principal genre, relate to it, assimilate it easily into their own campaigns.

Be certain to use a genre base for the scenario. It has to be fixed in its starting point. It might be fantasy, science fantasy, science fiction, or any other role-playing-game genre. Place the action solidly there. This applies even if the scenario is one which is multi-genre or cross-genre. If there are to be elements of time travel, planar travel, probability travel or whatever, you still need to have a fixed starting point.

In order to master the conception and execution of a campaign scenario, you must work within the framework of an RPG system you know. That is, even if you plan to present the finished work as a "generic" scenario, you should develop the premise, plot, and initial design based upon the game you play in the genre. Once it is complete, play-tested, and polished you can go back and revise the work to remove game-specific materials and put the whole into generic form if you wish.

The milieu of the scenario should be specific if you plan a non-generic work. That is, if you plan the work for game X in milieu Y, be specific and detailed in your treatment of the milieu. Then, you can eventually genericise them to remove specifics. By selecting constants in the genre and eliminating those people, creatures, places, and things found only in some other specific milieu, you genericise the work and retain it as your own. In fact, names are the usual key this effort. Dragons, dwarves, elves, and orcs are generic. So are British secret agents, spaceships, alien horrors, and the like. Your characters and monsters might be similar to certain named ones, but as long as there is no copying of material, the product is likely to be quite your own.

GMs will also find it desirable to have a milieu which is vague,

tion and capability which demands we provide more. The marketplace will certainly appreciate this professionalism, too. If the scenario exists because of "something," it then follows that if left alone, that "something" will occur. The plot is then more clearly set. Either the group is to see that the "something" to occur does just that, or else it is to prevent the occurrence. Some sliding scale of results falling between the full objective and the total failure of the group will be most helpful to the GM. "If the fortress is destroyed, then the rightful king will be able to raise an army and return to claim his throne. If the party severely weakens the place, then the king might still have hope of returning one day. If the fortress remains powerful, its forces will surely subjugate the land and the kingdom will be lost." You get the point.

Remembering that we are creating *for* the GMs, we do not force the purpose with the plot. We suggest possible larger things behind the immediate adventure, a shadowing of what can be there. After all, we don't know which forces of contention each GM will utilize in his campaign. Does good oppose evil? Or is it order versus chaos? There are many variations and permutations of such themes. Set general sorts of themes and plot accordingly. A general theme could involve the attainment of an object, or the gathering of knowledge, or a simple conflict against non-player participants perceived as enemies. But the larger purpose must only be suggested (unless there is a complete campaign milieu product series, in which case it must be stated). Even there, some flexibility and adaptability must be allowed for the GMs, for each will have personalized touches, at the very least, which tinge his or her own campaign milieu with varied hues from the original coloration. You should give specific data and details regarding the material in the work, suggestions as to all beyond.

This brings us to the point where the GM is considering how to put the players' characters together with the adventure scenario. Now you need to give some fairly detailed suggestions along with as many suggested variants of undetailed sort as possible. You are in effect telling the GM what McGuffin, or plot device, he is going to use. It might be that the dreaded aliens have our general, the



for that means it is adaptable. For example, a fantasy campaign which relies upon a specific system of government, specific aspect of geography, and the inclusion of a new player character type is much too restrictive. A GM must be able to utilize a scenario by inserting it in his campaign. If the GM utilizes a commercially available campaign milieu as a base, it is a sure bet it varies from the published material in at least minor ways (such as changing the location of the scenario from a city named in the published adventure to a city already existing in their campaign world) and probably has major differences (such as the replacement of an important non-player character with one already familiar to the players and creating an entire new set of motivations for that non-player's actions). If the campaign is one of the GM's own creation, the adventure scenario must be very vague or highly adaptable, or else there will be no place for the work in the world scheme of that GM.

The published work must immediately tell the GM everything he or she needs to know about it. The nature of the scenario, genre, and the milieu should be apparent from the introduction. Then, you should inform the GM what the general thrust of the scenario is, and its purpose. A summary of plot and potential action should then follow. Four to six manuscript pages will amply serve to handle this, plus a section on how the adventure can be made a workable part of a campaign without undue difficulty. That part is very important to the GM. If the scenario can be easily adapted to the milieu as an integral part of the world, placed on an adjoining plane, or has some easily invoked transitional means which slide the characters into and out of the adventure setting without obvious contrivance, the new scenario will work quite easily.

After such prefatory materials, give a direct introduction for the GM which states the purpose, plot, background data, and the immediate situation. The purpose of the scenario in regard to the milieu is important. Too many adventures tend to exist simply because the author thought of a good, entertaining scenario. There can be no question that I am quite guilty of doing this most of the time in the past. But we have now attained a degree of sophistica-



dreaded KGB has our informant, the dreaded demon has our magical spellbook, or whatever.

The players must be introduced to the adventure, and you have to assume that you have been sufficiently general to enable the GM to develop the background without having to alter many of your specifics. Thus you will provide verbatim sections for narration by the GM. These will deal with the background which brought the group to the brink of adventure, the current, pre-action situation where rumors, hints, and tips about things to know, get, and watch out for are sprinkled liberally about—along with a red herring or two, because nobody said you have to be fair to players! (If mystery writers are as upstanding and highly respected members of the literary community as we are led to understand, then how then can we poor game-scenario authors go wrong in imitating them?) There must be some knowledge of the whole imparted here, but not all of any part of what they might eventually know upon completion of the adventure. Keep track of this portion closely, instructing the GM and/or narrating directly to the players at intervals so that the information given is informative and relates to the purpose and plot. Using a mystery story analogy, the writer reveals information and clues as the tale unfolds. Do the same. This requires plotting and notes.

For another example here, I refer the reader to my published scenario NECROPOLIS. In this work I assume there is a place for an Egypt-like state in the milieu, and that the GM hasn't already developed one. Even if these assumptions are wrong, NECROPOLIS offers potential for easy adaptation. It *is* an Egypt-like state, and therefore could easily be assimilated into anything which resembled the original inspiration. Probable worlds in the FRPG genre are as common as ticks in the north woods. As to purpose, I leave that very vague indeed. The plot is not well-defined but thickens as it moves on, and the inclusion of the greater elements are left to the individual GM. Therefore, if there had been an existing Egyptian milieu in a GM's campaign, he or she could use plot elements previously explored, and adjust NECROPOLIS accordingly. In effect, the whole scenario can be kept as an inci-

dental thing, a sideshow to the main campaign, and in this case, my plots are quite incidental to the action. On the other hand, if the scenario is to be used as a featured portion of the milieu, there is sufficient background and source material for development of any or all of the plots the GM deems suitable.

The mechanics of the adventure proper are merely a matter of relating information to the map matrix. The various commercial scenarios you have will amply instruct you on how (and how not) to handle this. It is as simple as 1, 2, 3! It takes a lot of time and effort to do properly, especially since you must give complete intelligence to the GM and feed the players sufficient details to get them to react as you wish while not being totally duped. Again, remember this is *your* creation. You must give lots of details to the GM. Some incentive/reward material here and there also keeps the participants going. This is very important, and can often be a great challenge for the GM. Give some benison to the characters when they've had a particularly difficult or frustrating time.

Things such as new professions, skills, magic spells, technology, magic items, weapons, devices, antagonists, monsters, organizations, and reusable places are most appreciated, when not over-used. Equally valuable, possibly more so, are new rules, special rules, and systems which apply outside the scenario as well as within it. (Remember that what you create must still be adaptable!) Harkening back to NECROPOLIS, I introduced the concept of Joss, and I refer to it as an example of a concept/system/rules offering. Joss is a sort of combination of luck, fate, and karma. It is recorded as factors, and one Joss Factor can be used to positively or negatively affect something about to occur. For instance, if you are about to attack, one Joss Factor will assure your attack succeeds, but it doesn't guarantee anything about damage. If you've just attacked and hit, one Joss Factor will assure superior damage from the attack. If you are attacked and hit, using Joss will reduce damage, and so on. Any action or reaction can utilize Joss to maximize positive things, minimize negative ones. It is in limited supply and costly to buy, so to speak. The skillful will use it to triumph, the others to remain viable characters.

Play value is important. The ideal scenario requires a minimal amount of GM time and effort and offers ten times that expenditure in playing time. Each page of adventure text should get about an hour of playing time on the average. Thus, a 48-page adventure scenario should have about 32 hours of playing time, maximum, without some extensive GM additions (because about 16 pages will be used for charts, illustrations, maps, and so forth). Nor should the adventure be one which allows the players to accidentally (or cleverly) get to the goal without actually going through at least two-thirds of the material presented (again, 32 hours). If most play indicates that more than 10% of the scenario is not used, then redraw the map, or change routes, so that there will be a higher degree of utilization. If you give details of something—an encounter area, for example, nine parties out of ten should actually encounter those details.

This recitation of what must be in the scenario and how to do it is all well and good, but we must also address a singular aspect. What makes a particular adventure scenario interesting and unique? These features include:

Locale

Antagonist quality

Problem solving, including type and difficulty

Character ability(ies)

Multiple settings/parallels/genres

Mystery solution

Plot complexity

Let's look at each of them:

**Locale** refers to the basic setting of the scenario. Typically, the adventure will take place in a locale which is standard or usual in the genre. Removal from the usual to an exotic but possible or at

least credible setting brings a unique quality. Thus, adventures in underwater settings, other planes, clouds, trees, and so forth are possible places, though unusual for adventure scenarios. The theme might be humorous, strange, or serious depending on the setting.

Another approach is to vary the locale rapidly. In my novel, *Come Endless Darkness*, I placed the protagonist and his associates in a setting which was extra-planar and then required that "stairs" be climbed for confrontation with the antagonist. Each step was a trap, taking the group to another place, but each place had a "step" which allowed escape from the deadly conditions of that place. This setting could have served as an exotic locale for FRPG activity.

**Antagonist quality** refers to some special sort of opponent in the setting. The opponent might pose questions, command elements, be exceptionally large or small, have unusual powers, be numerous beyond the norm, and so forth.

Related to antagonist quality is **Problem solving**. There might be special types of problems which must be solved frequently, or there might be very difficult ones to contend with. The mixture of unusually fine sorts of problems presented in unique ways with antagonists of unusual or very potent sort typically provides the background for highly regarded adventure scenarios.

Change in the usual **Abilities of characters** involved in the adventure is another unique method for presenting the work. What if the players find their game personas with some special power or limited abilities due to the locale or situation? Such an approach allows a seemingly normal challenge to take on new dimensions. For instance, what if an agent in an espionage scenario is suddenly without his weapon and other devices and has lost contact with all associates except those with him? In the realm of fantasy there can be alteration of profession, size, age, or even form—such as human to animal. The number of approaches to altering things possessed or used or status of the character's usual powers or perspective offer much promise to inventive authors in the creation of a highly unique adventure scenario.

**Multiplicity of settings** is a useful device for a designer. Refer to Piers Anthony's superb book *Split Infinity* as an example. The protagonist is confronted with a parallel world, dual existence, magic and technology, game play, and more. The story is so different, presents so many unique features, that if it were presented in adventure scenario form for RPG interaction it would be quite sufficient to fill a demi-campaign work. Its subsequent portions (*Blue Adept*, *Juxtaposition*) complete a whole campaign within a mindboggling milieu. In using this device it is important to remember that there must be some corresponding losses and gains as one moves from place to place in order to enhance the uniqueness of the device. That is, the approaches to the problems in the initial setting must be no longer applicable in the new settings. This fosters fresh approaches.

**Mystery solution** doesn't apply simply to the genre of crime. All manner of mysterious things can take place in any genre and require the player participant group to apply their thinking and creativity toward problem solving of this sort. This is particularly useful in genres which have more emphasis on action and the exotic. Mystery solution can be used in everything but the crime genre as an unique approach. In an espionage milieu, for example, there can be a sudden mystery which alters everything. The agents return to their base of operations to find it no longer there, and there isn't a clue as to what's happened. Of course there is a clue, perhaps many of them here and there.

Mystery can also apply to situations in the reverse, that is the non-mystery mystery. Something occurs which seems obvious, but there are certain things which point to non-obvious possibilities. On the surface, all may seem proper, but special information which only the player characters know points to another conclusion. The non-mystery is the truth of the obvious and falsehood of the coincidental "clues" which lead to false assumptions. The dangers with all such settings is that the mystery must require extensive interaction before solution is possible or play value is questionable. These might be difficult for many GMs to handle,

more demanding still on the Master GMs crafting these adventure scenarios.

Finally we have **Plot complexity**. Of necessity all of the above must be a part of the plot, but here we are considering only complexities, twists, or multiple plot lines. Care in plot development must be exercised masterfully. Otherwise the author will have characters performing according to script, and not as their game personas. The complexity of a plot must still allow the player characters free choice within the boundaries of their personas.

The mythic quest and hero serve as useful models in constructing complex adventures. By examining those models, it is not difficult to vary and later expand them to develop unique aspects. There might be multiple and simultaneous calls to adventure. There might be a highly suspect guide or an antagonist offering magical aid. The threshold of the adventure, where the action begins, might be one which is unrecognizable until something unusual occurs, and even the identification of the task may be more difficult than the task itself. Within the plot, there might be an element which changes the approach from a cooperative solution to one which is highly competitive, and then back again, with the timing of the resumption of cooperation critical to ultimate success. Whether the plot is themed as good versus evil, exploration of the unknown, the communication with totally alien intelligences, or anything else, it must have purpose and there must be a structured milieu in which it is formed, and through which the characters interact.

Some scenarios demand role assumption and pre-ordained results. These are not role-playing works, regardless of any other merit they claim. Nothing within the scenario should be assigned to the characters interacting with the adventure setting. No act or condition should be prescribed with regard to attitude, thought, or action. That is, a character might be equipment-less, bound, reduced in size, or otherwise disadvantaged through the interaction of the scenario, but it is not permissible to force the established player character to begin this way at the start of an adventure.

Never state that a character will allow something to occur or will act in any particular manner at any time, except in such circumstances as loss of volition due to interaction within the scenario. If, for instance, opening an object sets off a blast or triggers magic, and under those conditions the character exposed loses memory, then the actions of the affected character may be prescribed. Otherwise, any scenario dictating actions which any characters are forced to take contradicts the game in all respects.

Perhaps one of the most useful and productive undertakings for an aspiring master of scenario creation is to contrast and compare how this is accomplished in other media. How does the epic storyteller create a world in the novel and then craft adventures within the milieu? From Herbert's *Dune* to Burrough's *Pellucidar*, there are many examples of most helpful sort. Follow this by examination of a game milieu and the adventures which are then crafted from and around it. Note the similarities even as the differences are found. Obviously, you cannot have a hero or developed characters in your medium, not as far as the protagonists are concerned, anyway, for the cast of active protagonists must all be the characters created and played by the player participant group. Guides, aids, and antagonists should be well-developed in the scenario, but only to the extent that it allows improvisation which suits the on-the-spot acting of the players.

One day the crafting of RPG scenarios will be acknowledged as a literary art form, perhaps, and accorded status equal to others of similar merit—such as the novel, play, etc. Until then, as with *Master of the Game*, it is self-fulfillment and entertainment and peer-group recognition which bring satisfaction. What more rewarding form of Mastery can there be?



## Chapter 8



# Why Does a Campaign Fail?

**T**he campaign of even a Grand Master GM is subject to failure. Almost anyone who has served as a Game Master for a year or longer has at least once faced a critical juncture where it seemed possible that the campaign would cease, while someone who has been a GM for two or more years has probably experienced the end of a campaign.

Assuming that the GM doesn't want to end the campaign, the mere threat of this occurrence is enough to send chills down the spine. *Why is this happening?* the GM asks. *Have I failed somehow? Or is it that the players are just a bunch of jerks who don't appreciate my efforts?* Notice the very personal and hostile last question. It is phrased that way purposely, for that typically is the inner reaction many GMs feel when their campaigns are threatened with dissolution. The Master GM, though, is more able to handle such a situation, for he is armed with both knowledge and self-discipline.



First, it is essential to recognize that the Game Master is entirely responsible for what happens during the campaign. Think of the reason(s) for the loss of enthusiasm, or for the games' actual demise. A general list would include:

1. Disaffection with the Game Mastering
2. Friction within the player participant group
3. Loss of interest in the campaign
4. Dissatisfaction with the RPG system
5. Loss of interest in role-playing generally

In terms of the degree of culpability of the Game Master, (1) indicates the highest and (5) the least. Let's examine each of these causes of failure, in the order given.

*1. Disaffection with the Game Mastering.* Disaffection with the GM might well come from players who demand more and more fun and don't receive it. It is even possible for a GM to provide too much immediate gratification for players, and thus cause them to become dissatisfied even while their characters are succeeding. "Monty Haul"-style games would fall into this category.

If the Game Master is unable to provide regular game sessions of some reasonable length, it is likely that the player group will erode, perhaps rapidly, as the individuals who comprise it find another campaign to play in or other entertainment forms to occupy their time. People are fickle, and past pleasant experiences tend to be forgotten easily. What they're offered here and now is more important, especially with respect to younger participants. Thus, it is incumbent upon you as GM to make clear from the start the parameters of the commitment you are willing to make to the playing group, and then stick to those intentions as closely as possible.

If the players desire more activity than they originally thought, you must make every effort to provide it. This phenomenon has given rise to "interconnecting campaigns" where, within a larger gaming group, players serve as GMs of separate campaigns within the larger framework of the original GM's milieu. The original

GM may or may not participate as a player in one or more of these related campaigns, but occasional player participation by the original GM is usual—and recommended, for obvious reasons. Failure to provide enough entertainment, whether because of unrealized expectations of the players or some other shortcoming of the Game Master, is a very frequent cause of campaign failure.

There is also the “GM as adversary” problem. Some Game Masters place themselves in such a role, seeing the campaign as a GM-versus-players situation. This remnant from other game forms is highly destructive to player interest. If the GM contrives to be an opponent of the players and their characters, then the characters are short-lived, they have no ongoing relationship to the milieu, no prospect of betterment, and the players have no fun. After all, the GM in the multiple roles as Arbiter, Moving Force, and Referee has all the power necessary to effortlessly “defeat” the players of a game. However, the Game Master thus assures his or her own demise too, for the group just melts away, leaving the “killer GM” alone with his brief moment of triumph. One of the things a Master GM must never be is a direct and personal adversary.

Neither must you allow yourself to go to the other extreme, handing out the instant gratification that many players seem to desire for their game personas. Never allow your campaign to devolve into the “Monty Haul” sort where the player characters continually gain rewards that are beyond the risks involved. The RPG milieu is at least generally reflective of real life in this regard. What is worked for and earned is appreciated. True advancement of knowledge and skills of the make-believe character can come only after reasonable activity and effort. In fact, players usually grow bored with giveaway campaigns, because the entertainment value quickly drops to zero. Furthermore, when they participate in campaigns outside their group, they often find their actual skills as players are minimal and the status of their characters is overrated. Even if players demand instant gratification, don’t give in to them. Explain the reasons why that sort of activity is detrimental for them, their characters, or the game.

A fourth reason why players become dissatisfied is because the GM becomes unresponsive to group desire—the GM places his or her particular likes or dislikes above those of the players. For instance, let's assume the Game Master has created an extensive political-intrigue situation, and thus desires the player characters to spend most of their time interacting with this line of play, which was developed for use in a city. However, the players aren't in that mood right now; they want to explore some dungeon setting, or have an adventure in a wilderness area of the campaign world. If the GM refuses to provide opportunities for play in the areas where the players want to go, then the play sessions that follow will be increasingly hostile as the Game Master insists upon the political intrigue and the players grow weary and resist.

The lesson drawn from this example is twofold. The group is just that—a *group*, not one individual orchestrating the others—and all the people in the group must mutually enjoy the entertainment form. In addition, the Master GM should not put all of his energy and ideas into one basket—the campaign will include well-prepared settings for all types of interesting play, including subterranean and wilderness exploration, political intrigue, and such things as crime solution, espionage, and anything else imaginable, which provides diversity of opportunities.

2. *Friction within the player participant group.* At first blush, this might seem to be a problem for which the GM has no responsibility. This is not so. The Game Master recruits and organizes the player group.

Are they factious, or is there a troublesome one? If you play favorites, then you can bet that their body is factious or that there are one or more dissidents or troublemakers! Stop biased activity immediately and avoid showing any favoritism or disfavor thereafter. Everyone needs to be enjoying the game, each others' company, and the entire experience if the game is to fulfill its potential. This will vary from session to session, of course. Like individuals, groups have their ups and downs. But what about the factious group?

If there is tension between two or more sub-groups within the

entire playing body, then you must either remove the cause(s) or break the group into non-factional portions. Both are difficult, for the cause(s) are probably due to personality conflicts and "leader types" in conflict. You really can't do anything about either of those occurrences. Splitting the group into smaller segments means either you have to GM more games for the two or more new groups thus created, or else you have consigned a number of players to either finding a new campaign to play in or giving up RPG activity. Whatever is necessary should be done, even at the risk of having some of the former members of the group drop out of gaming. If the group isn't harmonious, eventually *all* of its player participants will become discouraged and seek another form of entertainment. The ideal here is to have a trained assistant or co-GM who will find one sub-group of the player group desirable as participants in his own campaign.

The Master GM must be alert and notice divisive elements in their infancy, act upon initial unruly behavior swiftly. If he or she acts immediately to smooth over rifts or points of contention, or disciplines an offensive player on the spot, it might not be necessary to have to divide the group later or to drum a troublemaker out of the corps, so to speak.

Factionalism typically arises where there are two strong player participants, each with his or her own following, and each with a differing view. If the two cannot be maneuvered into closer cooperation through private discussion or by means of scenarios designed to share the accolades evenly between them, the problem will surely grow more severe. What could occur eventually is a split, with possibly both groups deserting your campaign for the efforts of their leader. Perhaps a few words to the two together, complimenting each in turn, and speculating on the results if they cooperated against situation "X" (a specially selected, fabulously challenging adventure scenario you have selected and informed them about), could turn the factionalism into alliance.

The solution of offering separate sessions for the groups is more difficult, for it demands more of the Game Master in time and effort, and those resources might not be available. The last resort is

to decide which of the factions is more suitable for the ongoing campaign, and then excise the other from your group. That action is drastic and possibly cruel, and not recommended unless there is absolutely no other alternative for survival of the campaign.

The possibility of turning leaders within the player group into Game Masters is a desirable alternative. It is an option that might also work for the lone troublemaker in an otherwise homogeneous group. Can the individuals in question be made into a team by participating in the mastery of the campaign? Teamwork might take the form of having co-GMs or assistant GMs, or using the "interconnecting campaigns" approach described above. Any of those solutions might alleviate factiousness, but only if it has arisen because certain players need to show excellence in competitive form within the parameters of the game. If the division is a matter of personality differences, then separation of the conflicting players is probably inevitable and should be accomplished as quickly and smoothly as possible. An individual divisive element within the group must be similarly analyzed. If that person can be useful through involvement at a greater activity level, well and good. If not, then act swiftly on behalf of the continuing campaign.

The annoying or obstreperous player is the least troublesome problem to address. First, tell that individual that you and the other participants in the campaign don't appreciate the particular behavior and that you won't tolerate it any longer. That may suffice to cure the problem. If the obstreperous activity continues, pick on the game persona of the individual who is offending, and if necessary see to it that the character is removed early and often from the adventure. If the player then tries to disrupt group play, send him or her packing for the duration of the session or adventure or even saga, with instructions not to return until proper deportment can be maintained. The player group will respond positively to such measures, and hopefully the player chastised in such manner will also be rehabilitated. If not, excise him or her from the group and be happy for the newly gained harmony that will be in strong

evidence thereafter. That is certainly a mark of the Master Game Master.

Of course, the Game Master himself might encourage the problem in the first place. Do you encourage player character animosities? Do you reward divisive behavior? Does disruptive activity receive positive reinforcement of some sort, or is it allowed to occur without negative sanction? The Game Master must not surrender control of the campaign to the player group, nor should the group ever be encouraged in ways that will tend to lessen or destroy the entertainment value of the RPG campaign. Ponder those questions and keep them in mind during play sessions if you have problems of friction within the group. The cause might be a combination of players and GM unconsciously interacting to bring about divisiveness that will certainly lead to the dissolution of the campaign.

3. *Loss of interest in the campaign.* Frequently the Game Master takes this as a personal affront, a slur upon his or her ability to create and maintain an exciting and challenging vehicle for the group. To be blunt, such is often the case, but the intelligent reaction is to consider the problem and do something positive to improve the quality of the campaign. The players do not, after all, actually wish to denigrate the GM's efforts—they want entertainment, and it isn't being provided.

At some point it is likely that every Game Master has experienced this problem. I know I have. Consider the following:

Within the dungeon settings of the Greyhawk campaign were areas that removed play to exotic places of water, wilderness, sky castles, and strange planes. Portions of the underground complex contained labyrinths; others led to caverns, unexpected places of beauty, dark temples, and so forth. In one place there was much combat, in another none, in a third a mixture of fighting and activities requiring thought and investigation. Outward and downward and elsewhere the delving adventurers went, and still they could never hope to know the true geography of that strange place.

Around that deep place of danger and the unknown sprawled both wild land and the teeming metropolis of the city. Those readers familiar with my Gord the Rogue stories will know a bit about the City of Greyhawk. Cosmopolitan and rude at once, its towers and catacombs offered as much in the way of derring-do as any dungeon could. Espionage and politics were there aplenty, all alongside simple taverns where thieves held concourse. Other cities and towns near and far beckoned. A whole continent filled with wonders of man and nature, kingdoms and despotic realms, and savage places too.

Beyond that world were the infinite places of the sort most humans of that milieu could not reach—except for the bold adventurers. These were the elemental planes and those connected to them, shadow and the ether. The multiverse extended below the realms of darkest evil, above the palaces of light, and laterally to the home of uncaring chaos at one end and absolute order on the other.

With all of that, and a co-GM too, there occurred from time to time a slackening of interest because one group or another simply had enough immersion in the realms of fantasy, magic, and make-believe. When that happened, a quick shift of gaming milieu would enable play to move to another adventure better suited to the player mood. The Old West, a brush with some World War II events, an expedition into New York City, an inadvertent transportation to a Starship, or a similar trip to some setting conceived by an author such as Edgar Rice Burroughs or Jack Vance—anything was possible. (Harry Harrison's *Deathworld Trilogy* can't be surpassed for a mixed fantasy–science fiction RPG adventure setting.) A Master GM should not allow any game to fail because the players wish to adventure in a milieu not currently available in a campaign world.

*4. Dissatisfaction with the RPG system.* There are many causes for this type of dissatisfaction, but certainly the most likely is the lack of variety in the game system. *Fantasy* might be the most popular genre for RPG play because its very nature allows great freedom of experience, including adventures far outside the usual realm (as noted in my Greyhawk campaign example above). The



demands placed upon the Game Master to move the campaign "outside" fantasy are likewise the least taxing, for "magic" allows incursion into other genres without any transitional difficulty or loss of belief among the player group.

Next in possible variety comes *science fantasy*, a blend where what isn't drawn from scientific principle is fabricated, and those fabrications, as well as things like "magic," are only vaguely explained in "scientific" terms. The lower initial interest and acceptance of a science fantasy game's "reality" seems to be the major reason why it is not as popular as fantasy, for it can be much the same as fantasy in all other respects.

*Science fiction* demands some degree of scientific fact for each of its system's components, and generally such extrapolations cannot be stretched too far. A low level of initial acceptance is again the principal cause of this genre's poor showing against fantasy. Considering the size of the universe and the scientific possibilities, its variety can be endless, but must be uniform. The GM is much burdened in such settings, for he is responsible for maintaining an internal logic and consistency for the technological level of the campaign and the organization of a world most often drawn from present-day sociological and political situations. Providing an extensive variety of milieus within such a game's framework can overwhelm the poor Game Master quickly. Both the game's and the GM's credibility could be destroyed if he is not meticulous in his preparations and "proofs."

Genres nearly as broad in potential as the three mentioned above are those which include comic-book superheroes and archvillains, as well as the modern supernatural. The comic-book genre is based on generally preconceived characters whose appeal is limited to an audience for whom the main vehicle (the comic book) has strong appeal. The supernatural horrors found in time periods ranging from the Victorian Era to the present also provide a fertile genre for a role-playing game. The limiting factors are again obvious—it is fairly predictable just what will occur during the course of any given adventure unless the Game Master develops adjunctive materials and a world knowledge quite apart from that



called for by the system. Games in both genres require exceptional GM skill to maintain. Otherwise the sense of wonder is soon gone, and the campaign may thereafter slip into oblivion.

Other genres that can be drawn from history, crime detection, and the like are usually too restrictive in scope, and this eventually brings the system into disfavor with the players. If they cannot develop an interesting and long-lived character who will engage in exciting and varied adventures, then the possibilities offered by the RPG are quickly exhausted. Players, no longer entertained, will seek their fun through some other game vehicle, hobby, or medium.

Regardless of the genre of the RPG, how can the GM be held accountable for its shortcomings? As noted in the list of causes of campaign failure at the start of this chapter, player dissatisfaction with the RPG system being used is not something for which the GM can be held entirely responsible. It must be pointed out, however, that in general the GM is the one initially responsible for the selection of a game for the group. The genre, the game design, and player idiosyncrasies might well contribute in large measure to a potentially bad outcome for the campaign. Regardless, the Game Master is not just expected but is required to anticipate that sort of trouble.

The expense—in money, time, and effort—of assuming the role of GM has been mentioned. Part of that cost is the purchase of new RPGs and the time spent perusing them with care. Get to know the scope of the game you have an eye on, the demands you will have to meet to maintain it, and the amount of effort you will have to expend to make good those parts of the RPG that are lacking. Fantasy can be fabricated out of whole cloth, but you'll have to spend money and time buying, reading, and providing materials for a genre such as modern espionage, even if the RPG system includes substantial materials in its main (game) portion and accessory products. If the appeal of a genre or RPG to the player group is likely to be transitory, or the demands upon the Game Master too extensive for available resources, do not use the RPG as the basis for a campaign.

5. *Loss of interest in role-playing generally.* This is the last, but not necessarily least frequent, cause of the demise of a RPG campaign. Sometimes, this phenomenon is found masquerading as the effect of one of the other causes. Here, we consider it as a cause unto itself.

A general loss of interest in role-playing could occur if the individuals engaged in playing did so only because it was a fad, and they had no real interest in role-playing gaming in the first place. Or it might well be that the players (especially maturing ones) no longer have the resources or desire necessary to devote themselves to the game. Let's examine that last consideration first, for it is one that is not usually understood.

Each player participant must devote thought, time, effort, and imagination regularly and frequently to a continuing RPG campaign. There can be no sense of oneness with the game persona, no thrill of a continuing adventure—no purpose, in fact, to play at all—when episodes are sporadic and disjointed.

Mature players (young adults and older) might find an irregular and infrequent playing schedule acceptable because they have few other entertainment opportunities of an ongoing nature. However, the typical RPG enthusiast is a player in his early teens who does have the time and energy to devote to immersion in an entertainment form. When that immersion is denied due to the GM's fault, flaws in the game, or other demands on the individual's time, many a young enthusiast will drop the role-playing game hobby entirely. Some bright young players can easily handle the demands of school and the obligations of continuing involvement in a role-playing game. However, when interest in the opposite sex, job requirements, college, and possibly family concerns suddenly must be dealt with, there is a most reasonable tendency to dismiss entertainment of the sort found in gaming in order to accommodate the new demands. Available time for RPG participation, when found, fails to return the same intensity of experience it formerly did when there was greater investment on the player's part.

The enthusiast then mistakenly attributes this to "outgrowing" the activity, when in truth it is a matter of the demands of real life

limiting the entertainment form's ability to fulfill expectations. This difficulty is often compounded if the Game Master has previously tailored his campaign activity to the wants and needs of a group able to play more frequently and more intensely. Those participants not able to be a regular part of the group fall away, because they become "outsiders" after missing a few sessions. They can't share regular socialization, nor do their game personas regularly progress as do the others. These pressures help cause the loss of interest in role-playing.

Having run an FRPG campaign since 1972, I naturally saw all sorts of activity, many different sorts of player participants, and have experienced most of the things I speak of herein. Faddish attraction began long before the role-playing game form gained national attention. There were always those who played because it was "smart" or because there happened to be someone playing of the opposite sex to whom the player was attracted. While a whole group of such dilettante player participants is most unlikely, it can occur.

As a variation on that theme, suppose that one person is popular among his peers. That individual becomes interested in role-playing games and finds a Game Master who is receptive to adding players. The popular individual begins playing, and a group of his friends then tag along and also join. They soon dominate the player group (by numbers, probably not by skills) and the two or three original members drift away. Then the leader of the group of dabblers decides that RPG activity no longer interests him. When he drops out, so do all of his friends. The Game Master too has become disillusioned and there is a total loss of interest in the whole. Even if the GM hasn't lost his verve, he might not be able to again attract serious participants to his campaign because of what occurred.

From start to finish the GM is the soul and spirit of the RPG, and it in turn is very much dependent upon the Game Master for survival. Knowing what role-playing is all about, the game systems, the group, and all the myriad other things necessary places a great demand upon the principal participant. You should not ac-

cept the role of Game Master unknowingly or lightly. Once you do, it is a very demanding obligation, but its rewards are very great.

Before ending this chapter it is necessary to mention one last reason for campaign failure — rather, a special case, which is why it was not put forth on the earlier list. That is deliberate sabotage by the Game Master. Perhaps the act is done subconsciously, but it is deliberate nevertheless. The tasks of the GM are so manifold, the demands so great, that some individuals who assumed the burden of Game Mastering lightly suddenly find themselves overwhelmed and unable to cope.

Player pressure on them to continue the campaign is so strong that there would be great loss in many areas outside the game if these Game Masters simply announced they were not competent to continue or could not manage to do so without undue cost in various areas (money, time, effort, whatever). The threat of humiliation and/or broken friendships can be very real when the existence of a popular game is in danger. To escape the onus of failure, they consciously or unconsciously do or don't do all of the things that will bring about the collapse of the RPG, incidentally losing some, if not all, of the players to the game form forever.

It is unlikely that any reader is a fledgling GM, but if you are, consider this carefully. Don't be guilty of sabotaging the RPG! If you find yourself unable to meet the demands of the campaign, bring in assistants, a co-GM, or find some other active Game Master willing to assume responsibility for your campaign or player group in his or her own campaign. Never allow the effort to wither away, because that demise might well include players who lose out on their enjoyment needlessly.



## Chapter 9



# What Are the Worst Problems a Game Master Faces?

**W**e are all flawed, so even the most masterful of GMs shows weaknesses and less-than-perfect results in any number of activities and performances. So what? We seek Master Game Mastery, not perfection. It is the sum total of our ability which is measured, not the component parts, and the whole is certainly greater than the sum of the parts. Yet if we increase the sum of any part it will have a bearing on the whole. The more important the part, the greater the addition to the whole. By examining problems, we can identify and possibly correct them to attain a more masterful approach to the role of GM.

There are several definite areas where problems can occur. Let's call them the Seven Serious Flaws of Game Mastering. They are:

IGNORANCE  
LAZINESS  
BIAS  
IMPATIENCE  
DETACHMENT  
LACK OF IMPROVISATIONAL ABILITY  
LACK OF ACTING ABILITY

A brief discussion of each flaw and some suggestions on how to begin to redress the problem will certainly be helpful in your striving to achieve better Game Mastership.

**Ignorance** is common but really quite inexcusable, especially for one attempting to be a masterful principal in a game form which demands sweeping knowledge of so many things. You have to expect to be tested continually by player participants, so you need to know at least as much as all of them combined. Furthermore, you need to know how to develop a campaign milieu, fill it with adventure possibilities, and play the parts of everything except the player characters. Purpose and plot are needed for the adventure and role-playing. Fortunately, lack of knowledge is a problem which can be addressed by you immediately and directly. Determine your shortcomings by self-criticism, prioritize them by considering the RPG, your campaign, and the group, and then begin to address the matter. You'll rectify ignorance by attention, observation, reading, and study. You should never stop learning—in all aspects of life, not just in gaming!—and the aspiring Master GM must focus at least a portion of this continual process on the matters pertaining to his or her campaign.

Ignorance is inevitable at times. There are always going to be those who know more about a field or subject than you do or can. When you encounter such individuals take advantage of the opportunity to learn as much as you can from them in a sort of crash course mode. If the topic warrants, get information on primary source material and then pursue further study. Never be afraid to admit ignorance, but if the knowledge is important to you be sure to correct the ignorance as expeditiously as possible. Ignorance is

the cardinal sin of mastery, but it is easily the most readily redressed flaw of a Master GM.

**Laziness** is another shortcoming which will defy your attainment of mastery should you allow it to do so. You must rid yourself of indolence if you hope to succeed, and this is true in all respects, not merely gaming. Laziness promotes ignorance, leads to procrastination, and will destroy the RPG campaign in short order.

Everyone needs a holiday now and then, and that's the expression of laziness we can all live with. Otherwise activity is the key to success. With activity must go a positive mental attitude, but being positive without any active application is much the same as being a storage battery. You have a lot of energy potential in a battery, but until it is hooked up it isn't doing anything. Put your energy to work.

Furthermore, you must motivate and inspire your player participants. Your energy and follow-through will move the campaign along. While it is impossible to manage to do everything, something positive and meaningful should be accomplished each day of your life. With that, prioritize your personal goals and place gaming in its place therein. Be sure that when it receives attention useful activity is undertaken in the area.

Laziness has definite indicators. Incomplete projects are the major signs of sloth, especially when the project is important to your campaign, the group, or yourself in the pursuit of mastery. How often one hears, "I have a great idea for . . .". That is the necessary inspiration manifesting itself. Activity of positive sort—the follow-through portion—frequently doesn't manifest itself thereafter, however. Too often this is because of laziness. The "great idea" withers away into nothing because nothing is done with it.

There is an axiom which says, "If you want something done right, do it yourself." That can be shortened to, "If you want something done, do it!" Eventually you may be in a position to delegate tasks, but that should mean you are so active you can no longer manage all of the things you wish to accomplish. *Doing* is the only cure for laziness. It takes motivation and a good deal of self-discipline to overcome, but it can be.

Bias mainly affects the campaign and players. Bias is prejudice and partiality based on ignorance or injustice. While it is regularly necessary to make decisions in an RPG, they must be made with an enlightened and impartial judgment as far as humanly possible.

Preference and opinion are not synonymous with, nor necessarily related to, bias and prejudice. Bias tends to be destructive or harmful. Something included in or excluded from the campaign which would add to some facet of play but which is or isn't included for reasons based on conceit or unfounded opinion is evidence of bias. Uneven treatment of ideas or individuals might also be evidence of bias. Preferential treatment can serve as positive reinforcement of acceptable behavior while an attitude of prejudice toward a non-approved activity could demonstrate a GM's disapproval, but there must be ample cause and justification for either usage. Bias is a demonstration of preference *without* just cause and teaches nothing save a lesson in gross partiality.

Anything which cannot be examined impartially by you is suspect of bias or prejudice. If some reasonable suggestion, system, idea, or the like is dismissed out of hand, then bias is being shown. Examine the merits of whatever is in question, make an impartial judgment, then form an opinion and make a decision. This demonstrates Master Game Mastership. Weigh treatment of individuals in the same scale, remembering that there is a fine line between preference and partiality. You must make decisions, but each should benefit the whole of the activity.

**Impatience** is not conducive to mastery. It is indicative of immaturity, lack of self-discipline, and egoism. Impatience is rashness and hasty decision making, and it will probably be regretted later. It is very easy to discourage a neophyte with impatience; the whole player group can become disaffected if you show impatience toward some well-intentioned activity or inability to act as you desire. If your play sessions typically degenerate into unruliness or arguing, it is most likely you are not using patience to direct activity otherwise.

It takes time and effort to perfect your campaign and for player participants to perfect their individual and game roles within it.



You must show lenient judgment for those who err, and you must be tolerant of differences and imperfection.

**Detachment** is sometimes very beneficial, but it is not so when serving as the principal *participant* in the RPG campaign. You must be enthusiastic, excited, involved, and very much a part of things. You are at once providing mythic adventure and sharing in it. If you do not *believe*, how will others ever do so?

Your position as GM demands a degree of disinterest, but this is not aloofness nor inattention. It is very much an error to be aloof—to consider your position as superior to that of the player participants. To the Master GM, nothing is more important than the play session while it is going on. Inattention is rudeness and a sign of undisciplined behavior.

Recognition and action correct the problem of detachment if it doesn't stem from a more serious cause. Boredom, for instance, is a serious indicator of some greater problem. The game is not right, the social group is not suitable, or you have lost your interest in role-playing games. If the flaw is from within the GM, and only he or she can correct it.

If ongoing detachment continues, the campaign will not remain viable. If this seems probable, have another assume your role as GM and find an activity which *does* stimulate and entertain you.

**Lack of ability to improvise** is not a critical flaw, though it is one which dooms you to being a less masterful GM than you might desire. The inspired epic, scenario, event, creature, hazard, reward, or role—those are the things which move the campaign from the ordinary to the extraordinary, the sort of experiences which players are pleased to speak of and boast about. And, the difference between the “ordinary” and the “inspired” is often a function of the GM's ability to improvise.

It is difficult to teach improvisation, but you might try several things which could possibly help. Be sure to read about the genre of your RPG and seek as many sources as possible, fiction and fact. It is knowledge which provides the tools of improvisation in the game environment.

Intuitive reasoning is, in my opinion, very closely connected to

creativity and inspiration, the two most important factors in good improvisational ability. In order to gain ability, try this—have family, friends, or the player group give you three things upon which you must build a story and relate it back to them—a person/creature, place, and a thing are the usual trio of elements thus used.

Similarly, whenever you are alone and have time, imagine what could be done with something, a use or occurrence which is out of the ordinary in regard to what the thing is normally used for. For instance, how can an ordinary book be otherwise used? It can serve as a step, as fuel for a fire, a source for a secret code, a missile, a weapon, a hiding place for a smaller object, a prop, a wedge—what else? If you can think of more uses readily you are training yourself for inspired improvisation even now.

Apply the reasoning from all improvisational exercises to the game, the campaign, and play. There will probably be a considerable improvement in this area over a relatively short period of time.

**Lack of ability to act** dramatically and skillfully curtails the mastery of many GMs. Having to deal with so many demands and roles within the game means it is difficult to get into character and stay there. That will come with practice and desire. What is more difficult is performing with drama and theatrical aplomb at all times. Obviously, some people are born with the talent to perform and others of us are not.

Pick up a book on acting and read it. Practice what you are learning on whoever is there—your dog, family, or friends as well as the play group. By making an effort you will certainly increase your skill, although it might never attain any stature above mediocrity.

Self-consciousness is often a major factor in lack of acting ability, and those thus afflicted need to tackle the problem at its root. In other words, deal with the self-consciousness first!

Of course, it is difficult to concentrate on acting when there are so many other things which must be remembered, recalled, and considered during the course of a session of play. In the final analysis, I am of the opinion that unless theatrical ability “comes naturally” it is an area where the Master GM is never going to

excel to the degree he or she might desire without a sacrifice in some other area of play.

There are two additional and related flaws which are usually manifestations of the seven already discussed. These are **overassertiveness** and **underassertiveness**.

Laziness, bias, and impatience are likely causes of overassertiveness. Laziness is involved if the GM feels he or she has to lead the player group for reasons of their inability to act properly in socialization and/or in play. He or she is being lazy by not encouraging the players to choose action and direction by themselves. Overassertiveness is typically a bias toward oneself, and impatience is apparent when the overassertive GM silences argument with threats.

On the other hand, the underassertive GM soon becomes either a doormat for the players or allows the campaign to drift and be steered in directions which will surely cause it to founder. Ignorance and laziness can both cause an underassertive condition to take root.

It is difficult to know when to remain silent, encourage others to speak, or to demand silence so that you can talk. If you submerge your ego to the group entity level and then determine the temper and needs of the group (yourself included), then you will know when to do what must be done.

In fact, the Master GM is always asserting influence of some considerable degree upon the group, but this influence must be with their cooperation and desire.

One last condition needs to be addressed. **Charisma** seems to ooze from some GMs while others sit back and silently envy those popular and lionized folks. While there are actually some individuals who do evidence charismatic manifestations, it is far more likely that the GM seen this way is simply one who is highly successful in his or her role as principal participant in the RPG. The so-called charismatic GM in such case is one who is confident because he or she knows his or her role is handled very well. This is a mark of a Master Game Master.



## Chapter 10



# Mastering Public Relations and Publishing

**H**ere we shall discuss various routes to expanding the role of the Master GM into the fields of public awareness, public relations, and finally, amateur, semi-professional and professional publishing. It is not necessary for a Master GM to explore these opportunities, but, as mentioned in Chapter 2, the accessibility of a Master GM's work is a clear indicator of his or her expertise.

There are several parts to expanded GM activity. Serving as a "Guest GM" is one which is worthwhile. It allows the host GM and his or her play group to see how a Master GM handles things—and hopefully you'll be a success in the role. It is a difficult challenge for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the highly social nature of most groups of RPG enthusiasts. The host GM is both the principal member of the team and the friend of the players. Those are very big shoes to fill even for the best of Master GMs. Second, you have to have very special material prepared, so that your temporary group can experience special adventuring

tailored to them, and the whole of the adventure can be completed in the allotted time (typically one play session).

When I have served as such a guest I typically utilized material which was in preparation for a commercial scenario. I carried a version of THE ABDUCTION OF GOOD KING DESPOT for that purpose for several years (and, now that it's available from New Infinities under the FANTASY MASTER logo, I am forced to again design my own unpublished material for such use!). If you can work up an "all-purpose" scenario for a broad range of character powers and skills, for a few or many players, and with a playing time of two to four hours, you are a Master of the art of adventure creation! Failing that, extract something which is not key to your campaign but is very special. Use it with adjustments necessary from group to group, and put in several places where the adventure can logically be concluded to bestow a sense of accomplishment for the participants. That's a perfect method.

That you learn from exposure to other enthusiast groups is undeniable, and serving as a guest to local groups is just one method of improving your skill as GM and helping other enthusiasts as well.

The second step is to serve as a GM at conventions. This can be done initially as a GM for "open" events or non-tournament ones. You'll bring the scenario material you choose and provide play for an announced number of participants. This is a difficult test of your skill and patience at times, for the sort of player mix will be quite unpredictable. The experience is very useful in judging how well you create adventure material and how you actually perform as a GM. You will also be able to compare the progress of your own player group with the progress of the random sampling of enthusiasts playing in your event at the convention.

Don't allow your own players to participate in these events, for that defeats the purpose of hosting such an open gaming session. Do try to assist those players who are less skilled, learn from those who are able, and see if any of the participants are also GMs. Interchange of ideas between GMs is most useful, and comments

and criticisms on your handling of the session will be more beneficial from one who likewise masters a campaign.

If you are comfortable being a "Guest GM" and running open events at conventions, then the next step for you is to serve as a GM of an official tournament at a convention. This duty means using materials and rules prepared and set by the tournament authority. You'll get the scenario, have a short time to study it, and become intimately familiar with the adventure and the objectives and goal set down therein, and then serve for long periods of time as the GM for the entrants. In such capacity the GM has his or her ability rated, unofficially by the players or "officially" via some scoring system. It is a test well worth the effort, because what others think of your ability is valuable information for you to have, positive or negative. In addition, as you progress in the capacity of tournament GM you will have the privilege of serving as GM for superior players. Styles and methods of play are invaluable learning tools for the GM, and working with a group of truly master players of the RPG is inspirational and educational.

Serving as a tournament GM in a large convention is an opportunity virtually unrivalled. The players, GMs, and material for play are likely to be of master caliber. Because role-playing gaming is an art form, such association is possibly the most beneficial in its exposure, and there can be no question that it instructs toward mastery if the participants take advantage of the opportunity to learn and benefit accordingly.

Expanding your GM-ing to neophytes, that is, virtually totally ignorant individuals, might seem both trying and unrewarding. Well, it is and it isn't! If you can manage the opportunity, do so. Are there places in your locale where some purveyor of role-playing game products will let you GM in demonstration games? That is, is there a shopping mall or center with a game store or book shop which sells RPGs, which might be interested in sponsoring a special event some weekend with you teaching potential enthusiasts how to be an RPG player? Talk to your suppliers and see if they are interested. They'll have to advertise the event,

provide a space for play sufficient to seat you and about a half-dozen player participants, with extra room for spectators. You, in turn, will have to provide your knowledge and expertise as GM. This means a simplified scenario which is highly entertaining, demonstrates the major features of the RPG system used, is easy to understand, challenging nonetheless, and relatively non-lethal.

You can take a page out of a book . . . literally! If there are the "branching path" game books published for the genre for your chosen RPG, you could select a superior one and use the concepts therein for the basis of your learners' scenario. Books of this nature have strictly limited choices which have absolute consequences. Direction is partially modified by random chance—dice rolling or other random-number generation. Each series of events eventually leads to an ending that is fatal, unsuccessful, or successful. The pattern of the scenario you devise should follow this formula.

Assume you are going to GM an FRPG scenario in a shopping mall. You have a display of the materials of the RPG system behind you, of course, for the shop sponsoring this demonstration needs to sell products to stay in business. The spectacle is heightened by your dramatic presentation of the make-believe playing environment. Perhaps you have a take-apart castle or a dungeon labyrinth built up in three dimensions so that the action can be seen by the participants and spectators alike.

You have decided that there will be six characters, five neophytes and one assistant (the best player from your group), so you have six colorfully painted miniature figurines on hand. Your selection of characters is indicative of the variation in approaches to problem solving in the game and also made as broadly appealing as possible. Inside the specially prepared setting, hidden from view, are areas with figurines of adversaries—human, monsters, etc., and treasurers, as well as exotic scenery and strange devices or scenes such as a wizard's laboratory.

Because it is possible that observers might eventually play, you set the scenario in such a fashion that each day there will be six different groups playing, and each group will have a different adventure. In this regard, the starting point is a nexus with six exits



leading to different places in the setting. Of course, there will be the same six adventures offered next day or in other such demonstrations, but that can't be helped. Each of the six exits leads to a room with some adversary or problem to overcome. Each adversary must be relatively impotent if attacked in the correct manner, and the selection of means (there should be more than one) should be fairly apparent to the uninitiated. A few dice rolls for weapons combat, a casting of a spell, crossing of some difficult area by means of some magical device or special equipment, or the thief's special talents, no matter. The test should be fairly obvious, direct, and accomplished quickly.

If one allows perhaps five minutes for explanation and preparation, then each section of the actual playing of characters within the adventure route selected should last no longer than twenty minutes. The adversary or problem must also be flexible from the GM standpoint, so that if the neophytes are not succeeding as they should, you (or the experienced player, but only *in extremis*) can take a hand and get them past the difficulty.

Excitement should build with each portion of the adventure. Each challenge should appear more dangerous, each reward for success greater, and the hint of even greater things lying just beyond stronger. Let's assume that each of the six possible routes has a clue as to what is contained in its sections "visible" somehow near or at its entrance. This gives the first group six possibilities, and will take as many minutes, while the last group will have but one area to explore and will take no time at all. You must then have a built-in additive for each adventure complex so that relative playing time after introduction remains in the twenty-minute range. Furthermore, if the group seems restless, you must be prepared to improvise, speed up, or alter what exists.

The whole of the demonstration from start to finish should take about one-half an hour. Thereafter you and your assistant will handle questions, suggest starting materials to interested parties, and generally speak about RPG activity—who plays, why, where, when, and all the rest. In this regard you should have material promoting your group, club, association, and the like handy. You'll



undoubtedly hand out a fair number of flyers and the like and recruit a few new players.

At the same time have anti-defamation materials ready. That is, there are many false and damaging claims and assertions about role-playing games, especially fantasy. Because DUNGEONS & DRAGONS is a world-renowned name, it is attacked most frequently. Whether your game is that one or any other, the generally baseless attacks and so-called dangers attributed to role-playing activity must be answered intelligently, honestly, and as clearly and completely as possible. Have your own answers ready for the casual inquirer. If there is someone obviously looking for trouble in this regard, however, it is best to have printed material ready to give to the individual seeking to cause you difficulty. Thereafter, avoid debate by all means. You are there to demonstrate how to play an RPG, show its fun and excitement, and to answer positive, normal questions pertaining to the activity.

If there is a likelihood of meeting opposition in the course of your service to the public, you must at least inform the sponsoring establishment of this fact. If there is no objection, you might still consider not going forward with your effort unless you are sure you can manage the results if a confrontation occurs. This is not to discourage you, but rather to prepare you for what might occur. Thankfully, rumors of these confrontations are far more frequent than the actual occurrences.

You might also consider expanding your GM-ing into special demonstrations. Occasionally there will be the opportunity to perform before a group interested in learning about RPGs. This might be a church group, a school group, or any of a number of social or fraternal groups. As a student you might have the opportunity to give a demonstration to your instructor and classmates, a PTA meeting, students in the Student Union, the faculty, etc. Your local library might be interested in a demonstration and a display of the products and accessories used, as might other places of similar nature—community centers, retirement homes, and youth centers, for instance. American Legion groups, Kiwanis, Lions, Rotary, Elks, Moose, Eagles, and the like are also possible places

where there is interest in learning more about the role-playing game. By showing the true nature of the entertainment form, by being seen and heard, you not only inform but at the same time dispel misconceptions. You expand the potential of the activity, its audience, and your freedom to utilize it as your chosen form of diversion, if not your eventual vocational pursuit.

### Mastering Public Relations

A closely allied field of Master Game Mastery is that concerned with lecturing and writing on the subject. Preparation for this form of activity requires education of the usual sort, plus some degree of practice in the smaller realm of game enthusiasts before setting forth into the larger world.

In the course of your education you will receive or have already received some very helpful training in public speaking and writing to explain your point of view and convince the audience of it. Assuming this as a basis, it is time to go out into the gaming community and hone the skills further. To prepare for the general public you should practice by writing articles for amateur and professional publications serving the gaming audience. Usually, amateur publications are quite tolerant, so be sure to submit material to semi-professional and professional vehicles as well. The objective is to sharpen your skills, and a lax, non-critical editor is not especially useful in this regard. In conjunction with this effort you might wish to try some non-game writing, such as letters to the editors of local newspapers, and reviews or articles for small local publications. (I'll detail some publications later in this chapter.)

At the same time, as you work on your writing skills, foster your public speaking skills as well! There are ample opportunities other than before the general public; for instance, in the gaming community there are numerous conventions which have panel discussions, lectures, symposiums, and all manner of other similar opportunities for speaking. As you establish yourself as a writer in the gaming community you will broaden the opportunity and audi-

ence for such speaking when at conventions. Of course, you must have some topic of special interest to the audience attending the events, or else have special knowledge to impart in a panel or symposium. Perhaps you are a self-taught expert in armor crafting, or map design, or you are considered very talented in one aspect of Master Game Mastering. Any skill or interesting information you possess may be of interest to the specialized audiences at gaming conventions. The pursuit of writing will both qualify you and develop the needed knowledge and skill to be used in speaking.

In preparing for any form of public address it is necessary to outline the material to be used. Sometimes you will possibly write out the entire speech. It is evident that there is a direct connection between writing and speaking. We need not speak publicly to be writers, but we must do at least some writing in order to be effective speakers. If you combine these two forms of mastery, you are able to work in both areas and learn doubly. You address and benefit the community of gamers, and this exercise assists in your training and experience. You then address the community at large, answering questions about RPGs, explaining their play and purpose, instructing others verbally or in print on all facets of the activity, and all of the audience is benefited to some degree. Those that are favorably moved will support the activity to some extent, and the game enthusiasts benefit in any number of ways. The synergism at work here is evident. Eventually, you will be recognized and asked to speak at various functions.

Being named as a special guest or as a special part of a program at a convention because of contributions to the RPG activity is a measure of Master Game Mastery. It indicates acknowledgment of your efforts in gaming. By that time, however, the recognition will probably reaffirm a fact already known to enthusiasts. There are exceptions, and these will notably occur at smaller gatherings of exceptionally capable game enthusiasts; or, in the case of program participation, occasional early detection of an "up and coming" new number in the ranks of the "regulars."

By "regulars" I refer to the people who know they are masters,

even though there is no official organization to confirm the fact. Each and every one accepted into the ranks has worked hard to arrive and continues to do so. Their names appear everywhere—new RPGs and support material for them and existing RPGs, as publishers, editors, authors, organizers, and so forth. Many run or are employed by gaming companies. Others head up large groups of active enthusiasts and help to sponsor regular conventions. All of these positions and activities are the results of utilizing techniques such as those outlined in this chapter.

For those interested in expanding upon their public experience, there are a few notable conventions which would certainly serve as excellent settings for such activity. GenCon is the oldest gaming convention held annually, and Origins is its longest-running rival for the top spot. (In the summer of 1988, for the first time, these two shows were combined and run as a single event.) Both are, of course, excellent, and most master GMs should attend one or both. They are prestigious events wherein a Master GM in the role of tournament GM or speaker may find broad and enthusiastic audiences. Recently, a newcomer called DragonCon, based in Atlanta, has attracted attention for its excellence, and a small, almost private gathering called Glathricon (Evansville, Indiana, in June) has stepped up into the ranks of “master conventions.” A Master GM could not find many better places to exercise his or her gaming or speaking skills.

Demand for *general* public speaking is small to non-existent in most cases. However, if you send information containing your qualifications and areas of expertise to local radio and television stations, with semi-annual updates, it is possible that one or another will have you do a taped or live interview or program.

The caveat here is similar to that of doing demonstrations for the general public. Be sure to find out the nature of the program, the topics of discussion, and who the other participants will be. Beware the situation where a panel of rabid anti-gaming “experts” intend to take apart ill-prepared and unsophisticated amateurs expecting to talk about the entertainment of role-playing games. You need expertise in many fields beyond games in order to engage

in an erudite and effective discussion in counter to such individual's positions. Think of what Geraldo Rivera and Phil Donahue and *60 Minutes* tend to do. Imagine that happening to you. Be careful!

There is generally a larger market for articles about gaming, although you will have to write them for particular audiences. (Writing specifically for the gaming industry will be discussed in the next section.) *Woman's Day*, for instance, would have to be approached with an article written from a female perspective, especially that of a mother, either concerned about the possible "harmful effects" of RPG activity or possibly the experience of a mother whose children were immersed in the activity and who wants to inform others like herself of the few drawbacks and many benefits of the entertainment. In either approach it is probably unlikely that the material would be accepted unless written from a basically factual background, i.e., the author was in fact a female parent with children.

Each periodical serves or caters to a specific audience. The editorial bias of the publication must be understood, the audience known, and the writing submitted must generally conform to biases, audiences, and style of material regularly published. If you don't feel comfortable approaching a large-circulation periodical, then perhaps you could feed material to a professional article contributor. You might get interest in such an arrangement, especially if you do the majority of the work and ask for nothing more than some form of credit. That would allow the pro to do a rewrite and polish, get paid, and have the credit to add to his or her list of accomplishments. (It's a hard line of work, in truth. Unless you plan to enter it yourself, the by-line isn't all that important.)

Newspapers will often print articles regarding gaming events such as conventions and tournaments which are newsworthy. They will often do this almost verbatim, *sans* by-line, typically, if the material submitted is well-written, informative, and of proper length. Be sure to get in a mention of yourself, or a "quote" or two from yourself in some "official" capacity. Better still, get those author credits whenever possible. The "fame" is what is needed to

reach still larger audiences. If you occasionally get a few dollars in payment, so much the better. You'll have earned them . . . and then some!

What is ultimately to be gained is a reputation as an authority on the subject. Whether it is a local repute, regional, national, or international is merely a matter of degree. The work is much the same. When the credibility, stature, and value of role-playing games are enhanced, you serve all of the RPG community, yourself included.

As a Master Game Master you must consider what efforts you can make in the field of public relations for role-playing game activity. As an articulate speaker and author of informative material pertaining to RPGs and those who play them, your contribution might not receive immediate recognition amongst the community of enthusiasts, but the long-range effect will be positive, lasting, and of undeniable merit. Hopefully, we will have such Master GMs actively pursuing speaking and writing to such an extent that they will receive due recognition. Until then be prepared to accept the lauds of those who are immediately around you and little else.

### **Semi-Professional and Professional Publication**

Being published is an indicator of mastery. The more you have had published, the greater the number of different subjects addressed in the works, the wider the audience reached, and the number of vehicles containing your material the higher your degree of mastery. Go for the biggest and best publishers you can get. The amateur effort in publishing is valuable and cannot be ignored, but some evidence of true mastery must be acknowledged with regard to professional and commercial publication. That is, even if you have no particular desire for "fame," acceptance and publication in a broad-circulation vehicle proves mastery to a great extent. More importantly, that wider audience gains from your contribution and acknowledges your status. But if you are new to the field, you should examine every aspect of publishing and determine which is the correct avenue for you to pursue.

It is all well and good to have developed mastery and wish to

share its aspects with fellow enthusiasts. But you must find them in order to do so, for the general public may be, at best, marginally interested in what you might wish to impart. Your output must reach the right audience in order to be effective. This is a real problem in some cases. *Dragon* magazine is essentially a vehicle for TSR's fantasy RPG line and their other products because the company aims it that way and the readership is so attuned. *White Dwarf* magazine began as more or less the same thing for the British audience, although with the purchase of that magazine by Games Workshop and the creation of WARHAMMER, Games Workshop's own FRPG system, one may get published in that publication only if material is aimed at games manufactured by that company.

As of this writing, there is only one other large-circulation role-playing game periodical, *Gateways* magazine. If you wish to submit work to any of these professional publications, you must first write to them and request their writer's guidelines.

There is a great need for more such publications, but the diversity of interests in the community of RPG enthusiasts, and the limited resources or time and money, make it seem very improbable that the need will be filled. Until awareness grows and there is a general increase in the total number of role-playing enthusiasts, the publication of gaming magazines will suffer from the lack of contributions of material for publication, an efficient distribution network, and all-important advertising. Here is a possible method for Master GMs to improve their communication skills and aid the industry as well. Read on.

Given the relatively constant audience for RPG products and the narrow range of interest typically held by the majority of the audience, it is unlikely that there will ever be a proliferation of professional magazines dealing with a broad variety of topics and circulating to a large readership. To the contrary, it might seem, for according to their own published statement, *Dragon* magazine has experienced a drop in circulation. One can but wonder if that wasn't caused by a lack of exceptional material being published regarding FRPG topics. Another probable cause would be the



exclusion of scenario materials from the magazine in order to furnish another revenue source by publishing an all-scenario periodical (*Dungeon*). Meanwhile, *Dragon* remains the largest gaming magazine in the United States, and *White Dwarf* is relatively unchallenged in the U.K.

These last facts are strongly indicative of what I have contended for more than a decade that the field sorely needs. When communicating in print, you have to rely upon the low-circulation professional magazines, semi-prozines, fanzines, and APA (Amateur Press Association) publications. I am a firm supporter of professional publications, but I have long contended that fanzines are what the RPG community is in desperate need of. These periodicals can be "semi-pro" in that they pay for contributions, accept paid ads, and have as slick a look and high standard of editorship as possible. Amateur Press Associations, on the other hand, are not usually suitable vehicles because they provide literally no editorial control and tend to circulate to a very limited (in numbers and in prospective) audience.

This is not to discourage contribution to a prozine, nor even to being a part of what is all too often a society for mutual aggrandizement, the APA. It is to encourage the founding of more fanzine publications, to publish and edit them, and contribute high-quality, relevant, and insightful material to them. One correspondent of recent sort wrote to me saying that his publication circulated to "only" about 300 people. Let's consider that for a moment.

Out of those 300 individuals how many are GMs? Because GMs are typically more involved in the broad aspects of the gaming hobby than player enthusiasts, it is safe to assume that about one-half of the readership serves in the capacity of GM (probably playing, too, in large part). If we assume that each of those GMs knows and communicates regularly with three other game enthusiasts who do not get the fanzine in question, the influence of the audience can extend to an additional 450 individuals. If we assume that the player-readership also communicates with one other non-reader not otherwise exposed by GM readers to the ideas therein, then the effective circulation of the magazine is  $150 + 450 = 600$



= 150, or a total of 900. That's probably a low estimate. Years ago, the pass-around readership of *Dragon* magazine, according to a general survey taken, was well over four readers per copy per issue.

Add to this the relative influence of active enthusiasts as compared with the passive audience. A good idea exposed to so small an audience as 1,000 active gamers can have more eventual impact than can be imagined. The initial spread of the D&D game, for instance, was principally through amateur magazines, word of mouth, and high enthusiasm. There were over a million participants before the general public ever heard of it or saw an advertisement. Yet at that time *Dragon* magazine circulated to only some 25,000 subscribers and newsstand purchasers. Even given a four-time pass-around readership, that meant that one-tenth of the enthusiasts read the publication. Yet ideas were circulated and these non-readers were aware of new concepts and trends.

This circulation of ideas occurred via the influence of the reader group on non-readers and also to some extent through reading of other publications, including other prozines and fanzines, by the group who did not read the TSR publication. It is possible that a publication read by 900 will influence others to also write and express ideas on the material in question, and the eventual result might be a factor of 10 or even 100 eventually reached through your initial effort. Put another way, communicating with 900 initial readers might well expand to an eventual influence audience of 90,000. If the idea then brings in new enthusiasts, and they are energized and inspired to seek more fellowship, they in turn will recruit additional numbers to augment the body of RPG enthusiasts. The ripple effect can be astonishing. Utilize as many vehicles for communication as you can, and contribute your best work to each according to your ability and its needs. Consider starting a semi-prozine or a fanzine to serve the needs of your local gaming community. But if you truly feel the need to publish, read Chapter 12, How to Create Your Own RPG Publication.

Creation and authorship of entire adventure scenarios is a highly respected and much appreciated form of mastery. It might

best be described as a combination of storytelling with adventure ideas, based on intimate and masterful knowledge of the RPG system or genre for which the scenario is designed. Typically all this requires is selecting the best material from your campaign, fleshing it out, and then carefully writing and formatting it into a suitable publishing style. You might begin with little more than a part of a scenario, a sort of "add this to something" approach. Perhaps that is published in a fanzine of some sort. Then you have gained sufficient experience to attempt a full-fledged adventure scenario for publication.

By using the style and formatting of similar works already done by the periodical or publisher, you have all you need to forge ahead with confidence. Again, perhaps acceptance by a semi-professional journal is what you might aim at. It is a step ahead in your efforts to achieve Mastery and will thus reach a larger audience. Naturally you'll want to publish an adventure scenario in the top professional publication dealing with your chosen RPG or genre. Most, however, limit size of such efforts, so if and when you find you wish to create epic adventure scenarios and complete campaign materials, you may have to become a publisher yourself or have some existing RPG house accept your work and publish it. This is the form of recognition that sets apart the aspiring from the masterful. The authors of commercially published scenarios are Master GMs in this expression, and the repute of their work actually marks the degree of Mastery each has attained.

The GM who is able to combine scenario development with rules, rules systems, game systems, and the creation of the adventure milieu is one capable of game authorship. All of the activity mentioned above goes into the design and development of a role-playing game. Not many people have managed to do this so as to demonstrate Mastery, but those who have published their own RPG are established as Master GMs. It is a form of Mastery that is difficult, demanding, and subject to continued critical inspection. It is worthy of mention that popularity of a game is not necessarily the measure of Mastery *per se*. However, relative popularity of a RPG within its genre is indicative of the general appeal of the

work, and is the greatest measure of Mastery. In this regard, consider what Master GMs have done in their work when devising their own. As in any art form it is necessary to study the Masters in order to achieve Mastery, albeit that which you eventually create may emulate or be totally different from the work of others.

One final note: Having material judged for publication will invite critical comments upon that material. Make criticism into a tool to both inspire and instruct you. Don't take it all to heart, just as all praise is not justified, neither is all blameworthy. However, with as much detachment as is humanly possible, you must weigh both praise and blame against the work in question. Is a favorable comment based on appeal outside the scope of your work? (The genre, something that is of special interest to the reader/critic, etc.) Does it contemplate something you did not when you prepared the work? If so, then rethink the work and expand it accordingly. Are you being complimented or criticized on content? Style? On the other side of the coin, is a critical comment blaming the work generated out of honest disagreement or from some base motive? Honest blame deserves careful examination. Such commentary can be most useful in assisting an author in finding and correcting flaws.



## Chapter 11



# How to Establish and Manage an RPG Convention

**G**aming conventions—gatherings of diverse enthusiasts from all over to compete, socialize, and observe—are exciting, stimulating, and encouraging. Even with an estimated five million role-playing game enthusiasts in the U.S. and Canada, we have insufficient opportunity to gather for gaming on a regular basis; usually we have our own group, but sometimes would-be RPG players are totally isolated and such events are their only chance to actually play face-to-face. Because gaming conventions bring such a special sort of enjoyment and entertainment to attendees, the Master Game Master is likely to consider establishing a convention.

The foremost gaming convention was also the first. I began GenCon in 1968 on behalf of the International Federation of Wargaming as a gathering for its members and other interested people. It was held in Lake Geneva for one day, and there were

about fifty to sixty paid conventioners. I managed the event virtually alone, although attending IFW members pitched in.

The next year the event was two days long and had twice as many different people. Military-miniatures buffs embraced the show, and in a couple of years the "rap" was that it was a miniatures convention—although about half the people and events were still concerned with board games. No matter—it was a good convention, even then!

When the IFW disintegrated a few years after GenCon was founded, the Lake Geneva Tactical Studies Association (LGTSA) took over. Although the group consisted of only about eight regular members, volunteers from the IFW days assisted, so the show could be properly staffed and Game Mastered. By then six hundred paying attendees was usual. At about this time, another convention was established by board game publishers as a rallying point for their fans, and since this convention was intent on wooing the miniatures enthusiasts, GenCon was then "discredited" as a fantasy/role-playing game event only.

Regardless of what was said, game enthusiasts of all sorts found the convention worthwhile. More and more people came. The LGTSA was dwindling away as its most active members found employment demands from Tactical Studies Rules (then TSR Hobbies, Inc., and now simply TSR, Inc.), preventing much activity in the organization. I had founded the LGTSA, then Tactical Studies Rules. The eventual assumption of the GenCon convention by the company was a necessary step to prevent its demise. Costs of managing a convention of over five hundred people are high, and manpower demands are difficult to meet, especially in a small town such as where it was held in. About this time D&D hit the scene. GenCon was quickly the place to be if you were a RPG enthusiast.

There was a meeting of game company officials in the late 1970s, and the subject was the competition between GenCon and Origins, the second major gaming convention in the United States. I was alone in urging that Origins remain fixed as the major event for the East Coast. GenCon would (and has) remained in the

Midwest. I urged that we assist likely sponsors to establish regional events in the Deep South, Southwest, West, Pacific Northwest, and in Canada (Toronto). That didn't happen, and although we have some regular and well-managed regional conventions today, there are still only two "major" events annually. The GenCon convention stays in the Milwaukee area while Origins moves around.

Parenthetically, I note that Dragoncon in Atlanta is rapidly moving toward becoming a third "major" event. I am very pleased! Gaming in general, and RPG-ing in particular, needs regular conventions of local, regional, and national scope. One day it would be nice to have six or so major regional events with a rotating aegis of "National Convention" going to each periodically. To accomplish this most worthwhile occurrence we must have a larger audience, more small conventions, and trained personnel to manage the larger gatherings.

Management of even a small local convention is not something to be undertaken lightly. It requires a considerable degree of expertise to organize, plan, and control such an event. It means hard work, long hours, little thanks, possible initial financial loss, and certainly a curtailment of gaming activities for some weeks prior to the show. The rewards of the event are worth the effort, however. As a Game Master you well understand the satisfaction of creating a milieu and managing adventures by the player participant group within that setting. The convention is very much the same . . . only more so.

What follows is a (necessarily) short course in how to put a local convention together. Read it carefully and ponder a bit before rushing out to begin work. Whatever you do, don't try to manage a large event without experience, for even a Master Game Master is likely to run into more antagonists than he or she thought possible, and chances for successful completion of this quest dwindle accordingly.

It is virtually impossible to establish and run a gaming convention alone. With sufficient money, of course, one can acquire manpower, resources, and all the rest that is needed for a successful event, but because it must be assumed the Master GM has some

interest in not losing more than a small sum of money, we'll not bother with such an approach to sponsoring a convention. Here are the minimum requirements for beginning a convention and managing it with reasonable success:

1. Staff
2. Game Masters
3. Seed money
4. A good date
5. An accessible location
6. Sufficient space at the location
7. Advertising locally and nationally
8. Support of local gaming retailers
9. Support of manufacturers/publishers
10. Pre-convention mailing with pre-registration
11. On-site refreshment facility
12. Program booklet listing all available gaming

Here are the nuts and bolts of each category:

**Staff** means the folks who are going to do all the work before, during, and after the event. They might also have to double as GMs during the course of the convention, but that's the way of things. Wives, older children, and girl or boy friends can often be pressed into service as staff. You should figure that you'll need one staff member for every 10 to 20 conventioners up to around a hundred, then about one for every 50 or so beyond that. Thus, if you happened to get 500 people at a convention (unheard of for a first time event without megaeffort and money), the staff would have to number in the neighborhood of 13 to 18. Unless all are willing to do double and triple shifts, then the higher number is more realistic. Here are how positions break down:

Chairman of Convention	1
Deputies	2
Registration, door	2

Registration, games	2
Trouble-shooters	2
Service	4

Before discussing duties prior to the event, let's take a look at how the 13 staff members noted above would function at the event. The hours of time per day, days of activity, and certain other things will have direct bearing on the work and numbers of staff needed.

The chairman is the one who must be ambassador of goodwill; he must circulate, see all is well, and make final decisions. Overseeing receipts and event regularity and propriety are also his or her concerns. Because he or she can't be everywhere at once, the two deputies are also doing much the same thing, only they will be on hand to fill in as GMs or any other place of critical need. In a two- or three-day-long convention, these individuals will be run ragged. If only a one-day convention is contemplated, then only one deputy may be needed.

Staff to stay at door registration is mandatory. Your expenses in setting up, advertising, and managing the event will be offset principally by paid admissions. Because most costs are incurred prior to the convention in many cases, amortization over two or three days is attractive. Because more days of gaming generally appeal to conventioners, longer conventions are often more attractive. One-day events do not demand the registration booth/table be manned beyond the first half of the day. Add one day of manning for each day of added convention length. Always have two individuals, so there can be no mistakes in the money received. Tight control of all money is absolutely necessary.

Games registration is not as difficult if a convention entrance fee only is charged and there is no further game entry fee. Even in such cases, though, one person is sufficient only if the event is one-day. Proper scheduling will spread game commencement over the day, but there will be peaks and valleys of demand in any event area. During slow periods the staff manning this area should also handle whatever souvenir materials are offered—special buttons,



T-shirts, etc.—to help generate money to offset costs of the convention.

Troubleshooters are sub-deputies who assist wherever and however they are needed. In most cases they fill in first when something or someone goes astray, then the deputies step forth to fill the vacant space. They relieve persons needing breaks, meals, and so forth. These first-line jacks-of-all-trades are true heroes at any bustling convention. Watch for them in action next time you attend a convention.

Service people are the ones who see to refreshments, cleanup, sign posting, errand running, and generally handle all foulups which the other staff aren't supposed to, can't, don't, or aren't around to do. Service staff personnel manage setup, takedown, and most of the physical stuff in between. Hopefully, they'll get a better dice roll next time and get to be deputies! If the facility provides refreshments and personnel to maintain the convention facilities, then service staff can be used as replacements for other staff members, so no one works demanding shifts of twelve hours' length. If refreshments are totally up to the convention staff, you will need double the number of service personnel.

Having a convention at a hotel is always a good plan if at all possible. For a guarantee of rooms by conventioners, the hotel will provide rooms for game events at no cost. They will provide free rooms for staff if you can guarantee sufficient booking of space by attendees. They provide personnel for setup and takedown. They typically have full refreshment and restaurant facilities on premises, so that problem is taken care of, too. Coordination with the hotel and the demands of using such a facility usually require more personnel in the registration, troubleshooting, and even deputy areas, but no service staff will be needed as a rule.

If an auction is held to assist in funding the event, one auctioneer for each hour of auction time is needed. Besides auctioneers, you will need an assistant to handle items, collect payment, etc. Two pre-auction item registration personnel should suffice. A four-hour auction might be managed with four staff members, but if that

time is extended, allow at least one per added hour. Because 10% to 20% of the price of auctioned goods goes to the convention, this is a very worthwhile expenditure of staff if there is sufficient attendance to warrant an auction.

Usually only well-established, large conventions are able to take advantage of the sale of exhibit space to commercial dealers. A "hucksters" room with tables at \$25 or so is attractive if a convention gets five hundred attendees, but the manpower to maintain such an area is not worthwhile unless a dozen or so tables are sold. As conventions grow, the price soars to ten times that figure, but that means a professional exhibition booth firm and (probably) some union regulations will have to be dealt with. The upshot is that small conventions usually have no special exhibit space for sales, but have a table or two of free materials from various businesses connected to gaming. Troubleshooters or service staff handle such an area.

Returning to the management of the new event, the next thing to do after getting staff together is finding GMs for the special tournament(s) you plan at the convention. Many events will be "open"—that is, the attendees will come in, and some will set up and Game Master for others. You should have some special events for advertising and to show potential conventioners that yours is a serious event. In this regard the Role Playing Game Association will probably help in assisting you and coordinating an "official" tournament of some sort with RPGA members doing some of the GM-ing if there are any in the area.

A tournament round can handle from five to nine players, with six being a very comfortable number for a GM to handle. Depending on the scenarios to be used, compute the number of expected participants in special events and then begin the process of rounding up the required number of GMs. Because this is usually a problem, you might wish to base the number of slots in such games to meet the number of GM volunteers. If you know the merit of each GM, then you have few worries. Recruiting GMs from mailings and ads is often a chancy business, for some won't show up and others might not be well qualified. Have at least one "standby"

GM for the convention and count on one of the staff having to fill in somewhere along the line.

A good main-event tournament is a first round of eight teams (of individuals selected at random) consisting of six players each. In the afternoon a second match of four teams is played. Late that evening, or on the next day a final round of two can be played. Of course, as you eliminate twenty-four players by midday, you now have that many new slots which must be available to keep the eliminated players entertained. Scheduling is a problem. We'll get back to it shortly.

The **initial expenses** incurred in setting up the convention will be the cost of the space, advertising, and mailing costs. If you have no special source of funding, you might have each staff member contribute \$20 or so toward the "war chest," and all such funds will then be repaid from convention receipts, after deductions for other sums owing. That way most of the money might be returned. It all depends on how liberally cash is spent and what sort of turnout eventuates. Unless you are very sure of attendance, it is risky to commit to a hotel/motel convention, for unless room guarantees are met or exceeded, the facilities will be charged to your group. As noted before, though, this arrangement does reduce the amount of money needed for space rental. Even so, it doesn't mean you will need less funding. It means available start-up cash can be spent to promote the convention. You might get by with \$250 initially. It might take twice that amount, or more, to get things off the ground. As you line up staff and GMs, you must also manage the funding. Any shortage in these three areas (space, advertising, mailing) means the convention will not go forward.

*Dragon* magazine is useful in many ways. Get a recent copy and keep it handy as you work on getting the convention together. Check the convention listing in that magazine to see when other events are happening. Use any other amateur or professional magazines you have access to as well. Do NOT attempt to start a new convention opposite a major national one, a big one in your region, or even another small event which is within one hundred miles or so of the place you plan to hold your event.

Select a **good date**. Weekends during summer or long school breaks are always the best times. Weather is a factor unless you get some tremendous drawing card. When I established the "Winter Fantasy" convention at Lake Geneva in early January (always one of the very worst times for a convention), we did it purposely. The site could hold only about one hundred to one hundred and fifty people, and we wanted a small con. Because many "famous" gamers were there running events and playing, the draw was good despite almost no advertising. This sort of approach is the antithesis of what you'll need, save for having some "name" folks there.

With a good date assured, double-check the facility's availability for that time. Changing dates usually spells doom! The **location** of the convention facility cannot be too remote or difficult to find, or else people won't show up. Being in a larger town or city and near a major highway is most helpful. The problem is always cost, however. The more urban and accessible the site, the higher the cost of holding the event there. This is typically why conventions are held on college campuses or in airport motels. If there are few game enthusiasts in your area, and you know of few in a one-hundred-mile radius, access will not make up for the dearth of players. Count on a small initial turnout and plan accordingly.

With a good date and location assured, think again of **space**. Although you might get fewer than a hundred gamers attending, what if you had a bigger turnout? You'll have some forewarning, but what use is that advanced notice if you can't do anything about it? Furthermore, your promotion will perhaps be more effective than contemplated. Room for "overflow" is always a good plan. Ideally, the facility will have additional space available on an "as needed" basis. This isn't too unlikely in a school setting, but in most other cases it will be more difficult to arrange. That's why you'll need early response to your solicitations for attendance.

Now for **advertising**. Six months' lead time is about the minimum you'll need. If you have any prospects for local interest, get in touch with the newspaper(s), radio, and TV nearby and see if they'll announce the upcoming event so far in advance. A message that staff and Game Masters are needed might be slipped in.

Naturally, the reason for the convention, a brief narrative about gaming, and who is sponsoring the program will also be needed. All such solicitation of media must be done as professionally as possible, with follow-up releases periodically—three months, one month, and one week prior to the event are suggested. National exposure is unlikely except through game enthusiast publications.

Try any good medium you wish, but be certain that convention information is furnished to all professional and amateur gaming publications. Get out your copy of *Dragon* magazine and observe the style and format of announcements of other conventions therein. That's the sort of release you should send to the magazines. Prepare copy in manuscript form, double spaced with plenty of margin space. Edit carefully before final draft preparation. Mail at least six months *in advance*, and repeat monthly until your convention notice is acknowledged or appears in print.

At the same time you're seeking promotional mentions of the convention, contact **local suppliers of gaming products**. They should be at least marginally interested in a convention, and if the retailer is principally concerned with games, your reception should be most favorable. Minimally the outlet should allow posting of a notice of the event and/or placement of convention flyers touting it. This will alert local customers to the convention, and it might possibly bring in uninitiated individuals whose interest is piqued by the promotion you prepare. The dealer might wish to assist in other ways—for example, if he sends out mailings he may be prepared to include an advertisement near to convention time. For some small consideration, such as promotion of the establishment at the convention, the retailer might be willing to donate a small gift certificate or two for awarding as door prize or tournament win. Any assistance given will be most helpful to the event. If a retailer wishes to work with you in any respect, give the offer careful consideration.

Concurrently, get in touch with all of the **major publishers and manufacturers** in the country. Do this separately from your announcement of the convention. Write to ask if they will send someone to represent them at the event. This is very, very unlikely

for a first-time and/or small convention unless there is a close proximity between the convention and the firm solicited. However, you should mention that you will have a table for pass-out/promotional material from gaming companies. Mention that you will gladly place any such material they send on the table. Suggest that any contribution of products for auctioning, prizes, or awards will be gladly received as a donation to assist the convention to be successful and thus promote gaming better still. In truth the conventioners appreciate winning prizes very much, so if you manage to garner such items, be sure to auction only those which are absolutely necessary to defray costs. It is far better to award extra door prizes and game prizes, because that helps to assure a happy audience who will return for next year's convention.

**Pre-convention mailings** are useful if you can find names of groups and individuals within a one-hundred-and-fifty-mile radius of the site. Put the staff to work scouring all gaming publications for such names. The Role Playing Game Association might assist you here. In any event, you probably won't have more than a few dozen prospective attendees for the first convention. Solicit all such individuals and groups with an announcement, pre-con program, and offer a lower entry cost for immediate registration and payment. If you use the six-month advance timing, offer a 25% reduction for pre-registration up to a three-month date prior to the convention, then a lesser discount thereafter, and a full fee for one month to convention date. Let's say you have a two-day event at \$10. That means a \$7.50 early pre-registration, \$9 regular pre-registration, and \$6 single-day entry fee. Those figures are examples only, and your own fees must be established by comparison of cost for similar events and your overhead expenses.

Be sure to retain the names of all persons who attended the event, and retain the initial mailing list, adding to it whenever possible, for solicitation for the next convention. After two years you can begin culling out names of individuals or groups carefully, for your mailing list should have grown sufficiently by then to allow more selectivity.

As an inducement to early registration you must provide for pre-

registration in gaming events. Each event for which an entry fee is charged should provide a prize to the winner, or prizes to the winning team. Free game events can be pre-registered. In no event should you offer pre-registration to fill up games prior to the convention. It is unlikely that more than 25% of the total attendance will be pre-registered anyway. Because you appreciate early enrollment, however, allow a little extra pre-registration for games, i.e., perhaps one-third of all slots in any game can be pre-booked by early registrants. Promise those registering too late that they will be listed in "standby" slots for the games they desired, so that if they get to the event late and others have filled it ahead of them they will still have a chance to participate. It is not improbable that one of your game tournaments will, in fact, fill up and overflow. Be prepared.

Because the attendees will be busy gaming, you must offer **refreshments on site** if at all possible. Even a half-block distance can be annoying. Coffee, soft drinks, and food are musts. Facilities for regular meals are better still, especially if the cost is relatively low. Most attendees of local conventions will have strictly limited budgets to operate on. This is another reason why college campus facilities are so popular, because the cafeteria is acceptable, close, and inexpensive.

If there is no cafeteria or restaurant on the premises, try for a place which will allow you to be the purveyor of the refreshments. Staff can put together a menu of drinks and fast-food items easily enough. Check a local supermarket for availability and cost of items to be served. They should both discount for mass purchase and accept returns of unopened/unbroken containers/cases or purchased goods. Compute the outlay, mark up based on competitive prices at fast-food spots with a bit of discounting wherever possible. Be careful not to overstock initially. You can always send someone to get more if there are more conventioners or the group is thirstier and hungrier than expected. Handling refreshments requires a lot of work from a lot of staff, but it usually generates a fair amount of profit to assist in defrayal of convention expenses.

A **program** is a nice souvenir, but you might not be able to



manage one (in which case be sure to have one or more "Event Boards" in the convention facility—see below). If you do a program, be sure to delay its printing until the last minute so as to get in all games offered and to cull last-minute dropouts. The program should advertise those who assisted you such as a retailer and prize donors. List staff and GMs. Give whatever local information is useful in it—an area map, a hotel/motel listing with costs, restaurants, points of interest. Have game information which is clear, concise, and correct. Location, time, GM, number of players, game, and prizes and the fee (if any) are standard requirements. The events listing should likewise provide such information. Even if you have a program booklet, be sure to have an Events Board, a standing easel or postup board, to post new games, openings in previously filled events, cancellations, and notices of all sorts.

Larger and long-running events can sell advertising space in the program booklet (and pre-registration mailing too) to offset expense of the work. As a first-timer, ad sales are likely to be nonexistent, but try anyway! If at all possible, have staff put the program material together on a IBM or other computer with a high-quality printer, so that it can be used as ready-to-shoot copy at a local instant printing shop. That keeps costs low. Clip art or staff drawings used to dress up mailings and the program should be line, not halftone.

Finally, running out of programs is not a bad thing to have happen, for obvious reasons, but be sure to keep a dozen on file for next time to make preparation easier.

Here are a few more tips and suggestions which might be useful in your endeavor. A two-day show is a draw. That is, if someone is going to travel any distance for a convention, the inducement for one day of fun isn't nearly as great as it is for a longer period. Two days is typically all that can be managed by an inexperienced staff or affordable for a small convention. Two days means housing people, however. Friends can be put up by their local contacts, but those coming in "cold" will need someplace to stay overnight. It is necessary to have a site with room accommodations of reasonable cost nearby in this case. Promotional mailings should give infor-



mation on hotels/motels and show price ranges for each. This is obtained from the establishments simply by calling and asking. Check about their occupancy rate for the projected convention dates you have in mind. If all rooms are going to be booked due to something else happening in the area, you could be in trouble.

Having special guests at a convention can be an aid in attracting people to the event. If there are any well-known RPG people nearby, try to get in touch with them to see if they'll come. Next to such Guests of Honor, in terms of attraction, come special tournament events with highly regarded scenario authorship and GMs. Least likely to draw large numbers of persons are big prizes. Most enthusiasts come to have fun, not to win a fortune in valuable merchandise.

Although you are a Master of the RPG, there is no reason to exclude other forms of gaming from your convention. There is a reasonable amount of crossover among gamers anyway, and board wargames, other strategy board games (excluding chess, as those who play seriously probably won't fraternize with other gamers), military miniatures, computer games, and even events such as PHOTON and LASER TAG will attract some fair number of entrants if announced in your promotions. The *Avalon Hill General* is ideal for reaching board wargamers. Military miniatures enthusiasts are harder to reach, but see if a merchant selling miniature figurines will assist. The atmosphere in a general convention is great, but you will have to provide separate spaces for different game forms. The result can be a fair increase in attendance, though. Consider it carefully!

Even with this short course in conventions, you are by no means ready to undertake the effort unless you've been to a lot of these events and are a good observer. It is strongly advised that before you start things rolling for your own convention, you attend several other conventions and gather intelligence and information. Get everything possible: the promotional materials and mailings used, the convention booklet or program, and anything else. Talk to the principal organizers and the staff too. Then speak to as many of the attendees as possible, asking them why they came, will they come

back, what they liked and didn't like about the convention. Take photographs, make notes, and solicit any help you can. This will give you invaluable assistance in actually establishing and managing your own show.

Hopefully, the initial one will lead to another and another. There is much to be said for the small, personal convention. The experience is perhaps the most rewarding for the truly dedicated game enthusiast. However, the community of enthusiasts needs larger conventions also, so if you find it desirable to enlarge your own eventually, the effort will be appreciated. There is no question that gaming as a hobby form, and role-playing gaming in particular, would benefit greatly from large, well-run regional conventions. Can you Master one?



## Chapter 12



# How to Create Your Own RPG Publication

**T**hose who suspect that convention work is demanding should be doubly suspicious about creating a role-playing-game-oriented magazine. Such individuals are being conservative. For every issue of a publication there is about the same amount of work as putting together a small convention, mainly due to the lack of a staff. That lack comes with the territory, as they say. As publisher and editor of a periodical you have to do most things as you envision them, and that means doing it yourself.

But this is getting us ahead of things, so let's step back from all the demands for a moment and examine the benefits of publishing.

Even to consider publishing a magazine or newsletter, you must feel you have something to say—you wish to impart information, fact, and opinion and enjoy doing so in writing. You must also believe that you have a good sense of what is publishable material, and can do a reasonable job of editing. You must enjoy putting in lots of hours and not a little money toward fulfilling these desires.

Let's define a magazine as a periodical serving a more-or-less general audience; a newsletter as a vehicle serving some special group—a club, society, association, or the like. The former is more difficult to establish, the latter subsumes an existing audience, although it might be used as the means for actually creating one.

Let's begin with the general audience. It might be all game enthusiasts, RPG fans, or the followers of some specific genre or game system. It is a truism that the more specific your intended audience is, the less likely you will be able to reach them in numbers, unless you have some special information which enables you to solicit the attention of this narrow group. As of this writing it is the reverse. Aiming the vehicle at the AD&D game audience is certainly the easiest and most likely means of targeting success because that audience is far and away the largest and most active one in role-playing gaming.

The broader the audience, the more varied the contents must be to span the diversity of tastes, the less depth there will be in coverage of any one topic, and the less likely you will be to attract and hold any enthusiast audience. "Enthusiast" is the operative word here. Most RPG buffs have a game or two which they pursue with fervor, but they have little general interest in other areas of gaming, role-playing or otherwise. Board wargames and military miniatures have appeal only as they pertain to RPGs or have some handy association to or function therein, which needs to be pointed out. A general interest RPG magazine is about as general as one can hope to successfully publish. The readers' taste will quickly indicate what they like and don't like, so even so-called general interest role-playing-game-magazine efforts will quickly mold to suit some very specific demands.

A newsletter will serve a related audience. It is usually the communications vehicle of an organization wishing to inform (and build the interest and loyalty of) its membership. Some newsletters are house organs sent to players of a specific game or the general product line of the publishing company. Others serve groups. It is possible to create a newsletter and with it build a special group. I did this in the late 1960s with the *Domesday Book*, the newsletter

serving a special-interest group concerned with the Middle Ages in general and games of all sorts based on the period in particular. The International Federation of Wargaming served as sponsor, so I could announce the newsletter in their main publication. I did an initial promo copy and mailed it to about 100 people outside the IFW. From this, the Castle & Crusade Society was born.

Who will be your audience? How do you solicit their subscriptions? How much should you charge? Well, you know a number of other game enthusiasts, and most of them will probably take a flyer and buy an issue or subscription. The price of the magazine must be determined by size, content, and how much you can afford to lose each issue. If you can't afford much, try doing the magazine bi-monthly rather than monthly, but keep size and content high. For the sake of example let's assume you're doing a \$1 per copy publication, with a \$10/year (twelve issue) subscription rate. When you solicit annual subscriptions remember that you are a person of your word and have committed to doing no fewer than twelve issues in as many months! For that price you'll do a sixteen-page magazine, including covers. In addition to those to whom you speak personally, try phoning associates and writing to everyone with whom you correspond. Prepare a single page of hype telling about the publication—contents, frequency, cost. Have a little subscription coupon on the blurb sheet. Don't be bashful about telling all you plan, but don't make outrageous claims. You'll have to live with your promotion, so take care when doing it. Mail this to Amateur Press Associations, fanzines, and newsletters. They might give you a plug.

If you can also afford it, try classified advertising in such vehicles, as well as ads in the semi-pro and prozines. If you're a member of the RPGA, they might assist. Unless you have very good reason not to, be sure to solicit as broad a geographical area as possible for subscribers. Don't stay within regional or special-interest-group confines unless you really so desire or must.

As you solicit subscriptions and ask that people to pass the information on so as to assist you, also solicit the following:

Game articles and scenarios

Artwork

Newsworthy articles

Reviews of games and related books

Opinion articles

Cartoons

Letters to the editor

Offer a free copy of the magazine or newsletter for work accepted, special articles getting two (successive) issues (but letters to the editor none!). Offer subscribers free classified ads up to twenty-five or so words, others at 10¢/word. Ads need only be taken if suited to your taste, of course. Depending on how you do things, they'll have to be reproducible or sent as a "stuffer" to the magazine. (A stuffer is a loose page of advertising which has to be bound into the finished product or placed manually — "stuffed" — between the pages.) A full-page ad or stuffer is worth about \$25 if your circulation figure is over one hundred. It is usually impossible to get ads in any amateur magazine until longevity is proven, the audience is known, and readership is in excess of five hundred. Even then there'll be few advertisements other than classifieds.

The list of materials to solicit for the publication is very close to the needs you will experience in putting together a regular publication. The contributor upon whom you must rely most is yourself. Be prepared to spend a lot of time composing material for your magazine and trying to figure out what to do for artwork. Layout and printing is the next step to take after determining that you will have sufficient readership.

Stencil typing and use of a copy machine (Ditto, mimeograph, etc.) used to be a very common method of duplicating a magazine. Such efforts are very much *haut-amateur*. With the computer and desktop publishing software, a whole new era in fanzine publica-

tion is here. Coupled with programs which enable you to do artwork, and a laser printer, you can produce copy-ready material which is of very high quality. Again assuming the sixteen-page size discussed earlier, see what local printers will charge on a self-cover, folded and saddle-stitched single-color job. Don't faint! And don't raise your price either. Nobody will be willing to pay a lot of money for your new publication. If you can manage the expense and still wish to try, have a go at it. You'll sell some back issues and gain sales and subscribers as the publication moves ahead. If it is too costly, seek alternative means of publishing. Check out instant printing of single sheets, both sides, and the cost of a heavy-duty stapler and staples. That means collating and stapling it yourself, but it should save quite a bit of money.

Check at the post office to learn how to best mail subscription copies. Be sure to leave space on the fourth cover (outside back cover) for your address, postal information, stamps, and the name and address of the subscriber. Again, don't faint at the mailing costs. With the printing and mailing costs, you have now your cost per issue. At this point, it is not important to consider such things as time, equipment, space, solicitation costs, and so on. If you ever go pro, you'll need to worry about all that, but for now the real considerations are the ones directly coming out of your pocket to produce and distribute the publication.

The name should be prominent on the front cover. Do pick a good name. Don't be cutsie, funny, over-dramatic, or drab. Have a sense of salesmanship and an eye toward the possibility of the publication's growing in stature and becoming a prozine. Name changes can be accomplished, but they're painful and difficult to manage. Along with the name, include publishing information such as issue number and so forth. Some artwork and mention of what's inside is fine practice, but neither are mandated by what you're doing. After all, how many of the magazines will be sold on newsstands? However, some will be ordered/subscribed to from impulse, and you'll wish to distribute promotional copies too, so something attractive or eye-catching on the cover is a good idea. To fill up space on the fourth cover, advertise something. The half-

page space can be used to plug some enterprise or group which assisted you, or a convention you happen to be connected with, if you fail to get a paid advertisement.

On the inside front cover (second cover) you can put all of your publishing information, subscription information, and copyright statements. Above this usual material is space for your editorial comment on the issue, the magazine, and so forth. Inside back cover (third cover) is a good place for something special. A comic strip, cartoon page, or ad goes into this position if at all possible. Opposite this should appear the classified ads. You have just formatted one-quarter or more of your magazine following these suggestions. Doing the work is something else again, but you have the plan in hand.

There is nothing quite so appealing as a good game-scenario for a popular RPG. A short, unique adventure does attract readers (and play). Expansion materials for a widely played RPG are also popular. Good new classes of adventurers, monsters, spells, and magic items for the AD&D game are good, for instance. Editorial opinion should fill no more than one page. Now we have four covers, eight pages of solid gaming material, and one page of editorial comment on a special topic. That's thirteen out of sixteen pages. Between letters, reviews, classifieds, and miscellaneous artwork and article material you can fill the remaining space easily.

As was noted previously, figure on providing virtually all of the material for the first few issues. Can you do it? Of course? Then go ahead and prepare about 75% of the contents for the second and third issues. The principal number will be completed fully, of course. Leave space in the next couple of issues for new ideas or submissions. Have about 50% of issues four and five on file. Now you can begin your newfound career as publisher and editor of a first-rate amateur journal with no fear of running dry after the first couple of numbers are done.

Naturally you'll approach your friends and close associates for material if you believe they are so inclined. Having more than one such person actually capable *and* willing to perform is unusual. Most game enthusiasts like to play games and read what others



write about games and gaming, but it's hard work being an author, and it takes away from leisure time spent pursuing play.

Don't accept news or poetry as filler, though original song lyrics of an appropriate sort—game oriented, funny, and set to a popular tune—might be acceptable. Juicy tidbits of gossip, even the sort which all readers might know the people, places, and things referred to in the tattling, are very much filler material. But they are typically of questionable taste and often place the vehicle carrying them in a category which is later hard to climb out of, so to speak. If material of "insider" nature is carried, the main meat of most APAs, then the magazine is of very limited appeal and little or no stature will generally be accorded to it or its publisher/collator.

This doesn't apply to a newsletter. That form of publication goes primarily to an "insider" group, and it is generally meant to be more "folksy" and possibly a trifle gossipy too. Aside from the experience of publishing and editing gained from the exercise, it is difficult to conceive of any lasting interest in newsletter publication, except when a broad category of material is considered within some special genre. For instance, the founding of a newsletter to follow what is happening in the fantasy milieu, with a heavy emphasis on FRPGs, might be sufficiently attractive to succeed in the gaming community. Such a vehicle dealing with most other genres would not be, because of too limited an audience and insufficient material that relates to the genre. Similarly, a newsletter aimed at Game Masters might succeed if the interests of the potential readership are identified and properly served. In fact, such a vehicle is much needed! *A magazine is general and can usually find an audience of some size somewhere, while a newsletter must have an identified special interest, association, or closed group to serve, whether established before or in response to the publication.*

Whichever route you elect to follow in publishing, there is no question that the effort is worthwhile. From the standpoint of the Game Master serving as publisher and editor, the magazine or newsletter is many things. The work involved develops your abilities. The publication provides a forum for your ideas and opin-

ions. It also gives contributors the opportunity to exercise their talents. Readers are given a forum for their ideas and opinions if they choose to contribute. Those who do no more than read still receive the benefit of ideas and opinions. All involve benefit, and this benefit extends to at least a small portion of the community of RPG enthusiasts. The amateur publication is much needed as a training ground for those enthusiasts who have a desire to develop into writers, designers, and authors of role-playing games and game-based works.

Whether you personally seek a career as a publisher/editor, writer, designer, developer, or author in the role-playing-game field; or if you simply find it enjoyable to exercise such talents on a basis which is defined as amateur because you receive no substantial remuneration from the efforts, the pursuit of mastery through publishing is one which is respected, beneficial, and much needed by the community at large. To some extent, each and every Game Master must be a creative individual. The Master Game Master is used to applying more of his or her ability to whatever is done, so such individuals are more creative still. By applying this creative ability to publishing, the Master GM expands the horizons of all concerned. It is a pursuit which will demand time, cost money, and seem at times thankless. Yet you must remember that it is actually one of the highest forms of mastery which can be undertaken.



## Chapter 13



# How to Assist Others Toward Master Game Mastering

**I**t is obvious—the RPG cannot survive without Game Masters! To assure continuance of the role-playing game, it is necessary to recruit, train, and maintain GMs. The better these principal participants are in their role, the better the gaming experience and the more likely we are to have the benefit of continued advances and improvements in the entertainment provided. You are already an enthusiast participating at the key level in the role-playing game. There is an immediate benefit to be gained from assuming of the role of teacher, and the longer prospect of better gaming overall because of this added effort on your part.

Creative player participants are not difficult to identify. The exceptional player able to excel in adventuring is the best candidate for you to select in your search for potential new Game Masters. Such an individual is most promising if he or she is a leader, has strong opinions and a high degree of creative ability or imagination. There are other candidates for training, of course. Anyone

expressing interest in being a GM is likely to prove worthwhile, even if, in the final analysis, assistantcy is the most likely level at which the individual can efficiently operate. Finally, the orderly and well-organized player, especially one with a deep interest in the RPG system and gaming in general, can usually be trained for assistant or co-GM if there is interest in taking on such expanded obligations, and there is also the possibility that exposure to the demands of Game Mastership will stimulate a higher degree of ability than was perceived originally.

The assistant GM is most useful, and actually acceptable, in groups where there are more than four to five regular player participants. The player selected as a prospective assistant must know the RPG and the campaign well. He must play at least adequately unless he has exceptional understanding of the role-playing game system. In the latter case, the potential assistant might be one who is basically incapable of handling a game persona properly but because of understanding of systems and rules is most capable of managing mechanical portions of game play in superior fashion. From the list of tasks and duties which the Game Master must handle, select those which are most burdensome but not of the critical and creative sort. Most often the assistant must forgo further activity in the campaign as a player, although there are occasional opportunities for play if you include outside material (commercial scenarios or related "demi-campaigns" of your player group) within your milieu. The prospective assistant must realize this limitation from the onset, for that individual will have to learn the structure of all the things which make up the macrocosm and microcosm of your campaign. The assistant will have to know the conflicts, organizations, plans, and purposes which give purpose and continuity to the milieu you have developed.

Initial tasks most likely for the assistant are: (1) preparation of the scenario prior to player activity, including detailing of creatures, things, and places in need of GM attention; (2) aiding of player participants' preparation for the session of play, including special individual instructions called for and the routine matters of

management and record keeping often necessitated by the game prior to commencement of play; (3) record keeping during play, including timekeeping, use of resources by the characters, acquisitions by them, and events which have to be referred to at a later time during play; and (4) the "debriefing" at the end of the play session where a general discussion of events, play, and results takes place. At this point the assistant suggests but does not actually otherwise take part in the awarding of whatever rewards the player characters receive for their activity.

Freed of the burdens of such nature, the Game Master is able to devote more time to the creative and dramatic features of the campaign and the adventures which are part of it. By carefully supervising initial participation of the assistant GM, you will have to devote more initial effort to the game, but after a few sessions the relief gained more than makes up for it. At the same time, though, you must continue to assert your participation as "master" to retain the campaign as you direct and to assure that the assistant works in the manner you stipulate. Game Master and assistant are there to enhance the entertainment for all, not to use the campaign as a personal device to amuse them individually. If the assistant shows any desire to expand the role given to him or her, you should certainly encourage this, but also control the increased participation so that the effort builds the campaign's overall worth.

You might find that the assistant has thoughts on some system, an idea for inclusion in a scenario, an adventure setting, or some addition to the overall scheme of the campaign. Allow the individual to express his or her idea. Weigh it carefully against what you know. Relate your own thinking on the matter, positive or otherwise. If the idea has merit, have the individual develop it further, with whatever modification, expansion, or change you direct after consideration. Then, when it comes to fruition, examine the work again. Have it corrected if you find it deficient. Perhaps you might find it useful at this point to make direct changes yourself.

Finally, when you and your assistant agree, put the material into the campaign in whatever way is appropriate. If it is of such nature that it requires Game Mastering—i.e., it is part of a whole of an

adventure scenario—then your assistant must be offered opportunity to expand his or her participation to becoming co-GM when considering the material in question.

The role of co-Game Master is the ideal place for aspiring Game Masters. As noted, a co-GM is principally desirable in large and/or exceptionally active campaigns. If you normally have more than six or seven players participating in a session and/or your group meets so frequently that you have little time to devote to proper preparation, you should share some considerable portion of your Game Mastering with another, a co-GM.

The individual selected for the position will resemble the assistant Game Master in most respects. In fact, you should probably start the person as assistant even though you have an expanded role in mind. Usually the exceptionally capable player, one who consistently offers help and helpful suggestions, and who shows creative ability in play and discussion of the RPG vehicle, is the most promising candidate for the position. All that applies to the assistant Game Master holds true for the potential co-GM. The person must understand the risk involved, the loss of player character participation, and the burden of work which will come with the position. After the trial period and exercise of assistant duties to your satisfaction, it is time to determine whether or not you will be able to share your personal milieu with another. That is, the time and effort you have put into your campaign, and the single-minded management of the milieu, must be shared with the other on an increasing basis as that individual becomes more active as co-equal to you in regard to the creation, planning, organization, and control of the campaign milieu. If you find it unpalatable to allow another to direct activities under guidance of the RPG principles and systems rather than your own direction or that laid down by your initial campaign development, it is not recommended that you attempt the inclusion of a co-Game Master in your group. It would be better to have only an assistant.

Assuming you do have the depth of character to share your creation with another, then you must exercise guidance, not restraint. Your milieu has established parameters, and the capable

co-GM will recognize this and initially work inside these guidelines. Later, as ability and experience grow, he or she will begin to make suggestions for expansion, revision, or other changes in the campaign to accommodate the diversity which comes from two persons sharing and contributing to the work. If at this juncture you find these suggestions are markedly divergent from your thinking, it is time to firmly shift the co-GM's efforts away from your campaign and into the task of creating his or her own milieu. However, because you thoughtfully selected a person whom you know well, and whose methods and thinking are parallel to your own, no such divergence should occur.

Here's how a co-GM works. The co-GM begins his or her participation simply by playing a few parts as called for in the scenario you have laid down. Soon enough this changes. He or she adds to your adventure scenarios, begins plotting background detail, new episodes of play, activity in areas which you have not yet developed. As you keep the individual within the bounds of your conception of the game milieu, you must likewise direct that person's activities toward those areas which best prepare him or her for eventually taking on the duty of Game Master single-handed.

First, you have the co-GM handle the detail work of seeing that players are kept in line, amused, and are not "fudging" in their record keeping, dice rolling, claims, and so forth. Next you see how well the co-Game Master handles playing the roles which are normally those of the GM. Next comes working with the group in regard to entertainment, impartiality in case of disputes, or through interaction of play. Only after he has handled these aspects of game mastership should you encourage the co-GM to bend his efforts toward creation of new ones with your assistance. Then follows development of new places in the milieu and epic quests in such places, with the individual taking over as principal Game Master and you moving into the co-GM role. If and when the last-mentioned stage of development occurs, then the individual is a capable Game Master. What then?

The answer to that depends on you and the individual. Does he



or she aspire to mastership of an individual campaign? If so, then the matter is out of your hands. If not, then you might have two choices. One is to remain as is. Between the two of you, you can offer more frequent play, or play for more persons, or both. This is beneficial, and if that is desirable to both of you then by all means proceed. Alternatively, you can withdraw gradually from the Game Mastership of the campaign, but this should be done only if you can no longer maintain your active participation, if you have plans to establish another useful campaign which your co-GM does not wish to or is unable to share but which is otherwise desirable, or if you wish to increase your activity in role-playing gaming in other areas which GM-ing hampers or precludes.

The inclusion of an assistant Game Master is aimed at heightening the entertainment value of the campaign for the player group. The addition of a co-GM is aimed at maintaining an overburdened campaign, keeping the interest of an obviously ambitious and creative player with potential for such a role, or for freeing the resources of the initiating Game Master for employment elsewhere. Hopefully that "elsewhere" will be in some other facet of role-playing. However, if it is to allow you to retire partially or wholly due to whatever other demands have arisen, it is at least the correct step to take rather than to simply drop the campaign and abandon the player group.

When I initially included an assistant GM into my AD&D game campaign it was to accommodate a player group which sometimes numbered sixteen or twenty participants at a play session. At the same time I encouraged others in the group to begin their own campaigns, taking time to participate in those which were begun with one or another character, and after such play to take time with the individual to discuss his or her Game Mastering, campaign, and the group involved. After a time, demands for work on rules, expansion, and new systems were such that I made the assistant into a full-fledged co-GM. He was obviously capable of handling that role. There were minor problems in direction and group interaction, but none in the creative or systems areas. What eventually occurred, though, was the unexpected—difficulty in



sharing the main portion of the campaign between the demands of its Game Masters. He and I both found ourselves wanting to utilize the main city and dungeon portions at the same time for disparate groups. Because my co-GM's efforts in the creative area had centered around additional development and expansion of these places, I stepped back and created other centers of action for play. The "Giants" and "Drow" modules are expressions of these efforts, as is the VILLAGE OF HOMMLET-TEMPLE OF ELEMENTAL EVIL demi-campaign. Eventually my co-GM found demands of other sort too great to continue his efforts in the campaign and moved on to other things. His name is Rob Kuntz, by the way, and you'll see his work in the FRPG genre in most places gaming materials for role-playing are sold.

Initially my added efforts brought more enjoyment to the campaign by the core group, myself included. Then more individuals were enabled to participate. At last the work of this former co-GM in the creative field has brought entertainment to a far larger group than any campaign could possibly accommodate. Perhaps the effort expended also brought more people into the fold, so to speak. This is all that could be hoped for. When you consider the possibility of assisting another toward Master Game Mastery, this same series of objectives should be kept in mind.



## Chapter 14



# The Philosophy of the Grand Master

**W**hat could there possibly be that separates the knowledge of a Game Master from that of a Master Game Master, let alone the mythical Grand Master Game Master? It is not so much a matter of knowledge as of *understanding* and *application*. It's all well and good to have something memorized, but the Grand Master recalls the principles of the matters, knows the means of application, and puts them to use. Here are some examples of this philosophy of ultimate mastery.

It is absolutely necessary to understand the only valid purpose for role-playing games. The games exist to provide entertainment. Entertainment is basically fun. The enjoyment of the mythic adventure of the game scenario, the escape from the routine and mundane, the heroism, and the sense of a kind of immortality in game terms are all there, of course. So too, is the socialization provided by the group. Without the interaction of the social group, the role-playing game experience is less entertaining—its drama is

less intense, its dangers abstract, its triumphs shallow. The Grand Master knows this and applies the knowledge in mastering games, playing and speaking.

There are many very useful benefits which accrue to role-playing game participants. Sublimation of aggression and hostility is one which is an evident counter to those who speak of violence in RPG play. There is only make-believe violence, and play-acting is likely a very good means of sublimating the urges and tendencies inherent in all of us. Role-playing games encourage imagination, creativity, reading, group cooperation, social interaction, and the benefit of mutual assistance even with diverse racial perspectives. They teach problem solving by the individual, and in conjunction with the group. They offer experimental models where behavior modes can be tested without actually having to experience such choice-and-result sequences in reality. Many skills and disciplines are encouraged by the general play, and specific ones can be included in scenarios in order to couple entertainment with real learning. The Grand Master understands that well and applies this knowledge to the principal law of the RPG.

There is a message contained in the true role-playing game. It is the message of the difficulty in surviving alone, and the folly of trying to profit from the loss of others. The inability of any lone individual to successfully cope with every challenge is evident in RPGs and reflects life. Even the most infinitely appealing superhero, Superman, has associates and the aid of law and order. The Lone Ranger has Tonto, his horse, a nephew, and law and order. So it goes with heroes from comic book to myth, but the role-playing game brings the heroic into better perspective by demonstrating a course of progress which requires the association and cooperation of like-minded individuals.

The modern emphasis on a business philosophy which negates the concept of winning at the loss of another and replaces it with mutual goals and shared victory is nothing new to role-playing games. It existed when the first RPG was published in 1974. Master role-players will have no difficulty understanding the concept. They realize that even as each individual becomes more

capable and adept in his or her specialization, the diversity of demands outside requires group effort to meet challenges. Sharing in the success of others who are part of the group strengthens the individual member and helps to assure group survival, growth, continuing ability to move on to greater things. The Grand Master GM understands all of that and applies it to the RPG and to life. Unfortunately, there are too few Grand Masters and the group concept is still too restricted by boundaries. This, also, is known and understood.

There are always diverse viewpoints and common goals. The initial portion of the CYBORG COMMANDO game, for example, shows not only a diversity of individuals serving in the same general capacity, but it stresses a basically "good" humanity versus a malign extraterrestrial invader. Communality of man and computer is noted, as is the fact that there are humans who are aberrant, selfish, malign. It is contemplated that additional portions of this RPG will expand roles for characters, offer a profusion of differences, and at the same time, with such additional viewpoints, demonstrate the harmony of goals common to mankind. In actuality there is an innate desire for this in humans, even as there are aggressions and hostilities buried within us. The striving toward some higher ethos is plain; it is a theme in all of mankind's finest works. The ideals which are the underlying part of many role-playing games are part of the appeal, albeit perhaps only subconsciously noted by many players and even Game Masters. Nonetheless, the Grand Master GM understands this and with that knowledge builds with purpose and ethical principles.

Over thousands of years mankind has devised but four or five basic forms of games for entertainment. Table games, board games, card games, and "parlor" games (guessing games, hide-and-seek, charades, etc.) have origins buried in the distant past. Role-playing games emerged only a few years ago. The game form is in its infancy, uncertain of its identity, growing and changing, and but partially understood at best by the majority of people everywhere. The development and changes which the game form will undergo over the next few decades will be many and have the

potential of profound benefit for all even as they provide entertainment of the highest sort.

Yet even with computers to make access and utilization of the game form easier and more spectacular, the human element is indispensable to the RPG. The Game Master must be there, and the GM shapes the game. Without more and better Game Masters the infant game form will never reach its maturity, develop its potentials, and offer its infinite variety of entertainment and benefit to us. This is very well known to the Grand Master Game Master, and he or she is concerned. To this, each one grants attention and strives to assure the survival and growth of the role-playing game.

Mastery is a state of mind, a desire and determination coupled with results which are sometimes immeasurable but usually evident. The large and active play group represents and recognizes Master Game Mastering. The contributions of the Game Master are evident in other areas as he contributes toward the betterment of the gaming community at large or to some game-specific segment of the community. These are evidenced by activity, printed material, articles, publications, and/or commercially published products bearing the individual's name as tester, editor, developer, or designer/author. Thus the claim of Master Game Master is always substantiated by factual evidence of one sort or another. It is recognized and is no mere pretense, even though as of this writing there is basically no formal vehicle for recognition within the RPG-enthusiast community. This is known to the Grand Master because he or she passed through the same processes in which others are currently immersed. As with the martial arts discipline, attainment of higher degrees of mastery is unrecognized by outward sign or trapping. It is a state of mind, dedication, and philosophy which sets such progress at a different level and is thus recognized in special ways.

The passage beyond Mastery to Grand Mastery is neither mysterious nor earthshaking. It is neither the culmination of things nor a badge of office which brings a lessened activity. Being what it is, Grand Mastery requires more and continuing effort to fulfill the obligations which are unspoken, unrecorded, but demanded by

those who are of like mind. There is no list of Master Game Masters, and the same is true of Grand Masters. If some do or do not regard themselves as Masters or Grand Masters, the error either way is not of concern as long as these individuals conduct themselves as such in regard to their efforts and contributions toward their group, the role-playing game, and the community of game enthusiasts at large. Being a state of mind as well as a measurable attainment which is seen and appreciated, there might well be disagreement among Masters and Grand Masters as to just who is or isn't entitled to the status. No matter. The effort and contribution count. The regard of the ordinary participants and the results produced are the final and lasting measure of merit. This the Grand Master knows and always bears in mind because the lasting effort and enduring contribution in the end mark him with indelible recognition. It is as with everything else mankind does. The matter is unfinished until the last stride of the runner is made, and in respect to the role-playing-game genre, that finish line is veiled in the mists of the future.

Lastly, the Grand Master Game Master never wonders why all of this is done. Avocationally or vocationally, no matter. The effort is made because there is satisfaction in seeing the accomplishment; entertainment in the end product. It is, in short, a whole lot of fun, and the nice part about having that fun is you get to share it with others.



## Afterword



**T**his work is one which tells all. Because it is difficult to give specific examples to so diverse an audience, I have had to use selected references of general nature when addressing examples for instruction. Obviously, various readers will play dissimilar role-playing-game systems. Just as true is the fact that I don't play each and every form of RPG published. Keeping up with that challenge would be a full-time occupation and then some! Nonetheless I have held back nothing which might benefit the majority of readers. Despite this, I believe that there will be found many areas where more could be said. That is excellent.

Because I devised the basis from which the first role-playing game was created (CHAINMAIL, published 1971) and co-authored that first game (DUNGEONS & DRAGONS, 1974), I am often asked if I have feeling of resentment toward later games which use the concepts of the D&D game, deal in the fantasy

genre, or otherwise rely upon the ideas and audience which was built upon that. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, so they say. I cannot but agree. Similarly inquiries about my feeling toward the many other entertainment forms borrowing from the D&D game and its popularity do not annoy or anger me at all. In fact I am saddened only that there isn't more exploitation. If imitation is flattery, how much more flattering is emulation in the true sense of the term? To be surpassed by another author/designer is something which I have hoped for and will continue to hope for. That can only make the whole of role-playing better. Likewise, the greater the exposure to the imaginative, creative, and social aspects of role-playing, the greater the participation in the field, and thus the prospects of better things to come.

This in an infant game form. Over some five thousand years of recorded history mankind has generated only a limited number of games. Who can say which was the first sort? Possibly some dicelike one, a table game? Then again it might have been a board game similar to checkers. Older than either might be some form of what we call parlor games—charades, hide-and-seek, twenty questions, and the like. The newest form save one is certainly the card game. Whether in the form of plaques, tiles, or pasteboards it seems certain that these devices have existed for mere centuries. And then we have the new kid on the block, role-playing games. This author is quite unlikely to see the half-century anniversary of their creation, let alone a mere centennial celebration. I am, therefore, writing from the dawn of the RPG's history. What is now relatively new, untried, and unknown will soon become quite commonplace. Aspects undreamed of now will one day become commonplace too. That is the march of progress.

Believing thus, I have committed to writing all of those things I know and can express in such a work as this, information and ideas old and new, in order to assist in the developmental process of becoming a Master Game Master. Better game-play is the hoped-for result, and with that, better game-scenarios and better and more innovative systems of role-playing. There are no secrets, for



there is nothing new under the sun. Here is contained a regrouping of ideas, a different presentation. You must work with this information, recombining and adding as you will, to assure the level of mastery you desire. May you succeed in all of your RPG endeavors!



## Appendix A



# Blue Demons, Red Devils

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## & RPGs,

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## Or What's in a Name?

### How to Deal With Those Who Bedevil Role-Playing Games

It is an unfortunate fact of life that the role-playing community has come under vicious attack from yellow journalists and extremist groups which make any number of false, inaccurate, or simply ridiculous claims. As you journey beyond the comfortable and private role of an individual GM who has only one small group to attend to, you may find yourself closer and closer to the uncomfortable limelight these fanatical folk often create. The chance of your actually having to speak to one of them or deal with such a confrontation is slim, and not recommended, especially if you are not a mental-health professional, a member of the clergy, or other such impeccable social figure.

But encountering ignorance on a small scale is more likely, whether from a new friend who refuses to join a game because he has "heard rumors," or from a person who is willing to understand but had been misinformed. In an attempt to both enlighten the confused and spare the

role-playing activity from the continued spread of idle misinformation, a Master GM may learn about the organizations in question and know what they object to. Such information, and the ability to respond to it in a clear, logical, and authoritative manner, may be enough to ease out of an uncomfortable situation or guide someone into better understanding.

Oddly enough, we don't seem to have progressed far beyond the Salem witch-hunt stage. "Thar's demons in them-thar games!" cry the fanatical opponents of RPGs generally and those dealing with fantasy and magic in particular. How can anyone alive today retain such quaint superstitions? But once you're on the receiving end of their hysterical attacks and the target of the propaganda they dish out, those notions won't seem either quaint or democratic.

It is certain that some fools actually believe that game materials and imagined events are "real." They mean real in the sense that someone able to play a Fantasy RPG deals with magic spells, demons, and all manner of dark and evil things. These folk can't seem to separate fantasy from reality. Is the gold and treasure in the FRPG real? Of course not, and anyone who claimed that would be scoffed at loudly. How about the fire-breathing dragons? Nope. Nary a one. Does one playing a character who is a thief actually learn such skills as slitting purses? Scaling buildings, walls? Picking locks? Never. That's all make-believe. How about warriors, then; do they know how to don a suit of full armor, fence with a two-handed sword, ride a charger, and ply a lance? Of course not, for the players with such characters are everyday people living in the 20th century. Do "priest" characters actually have idols, burn incense, and say ritual prayers?

We could go on and on, but it would be to no avail. Even seeing a game probably won't dispel such superstitious illusions from the minds of those who think evil of RPGs.

Objections from such elements typically fall into two broad categories. *One*: Nobody should ever mention gods, for all others save the particular God the objectors believe in (and in the exact way they happen to depict that one, it is important to add) are devils, demons, or otherwise nasty. To have make-believe deities and make-believe priests is to become idolatrous and devil-serving at best. Magic and magic spells are also works of the evil powers, as are all mental abilities such as ESP, levitation, and the rest. To even make-believe, to pretend, is a dangerous "introduction to the Occult." One can't but wonder if these good and learned people have any idea what occult means. . . . In any event, having anything to do with such

material is sure to get you "possessed by demons." *Two*: Role-playing games are tools of undefined "psychological" (sic), "sensitivity-training," and humanism (and probably communist-inspired plots). There cannot possibly be a multiplicity of views, more than one truth, or free-thinking. RPGs inspire such views and are therefore bad.

How can one argue with beliefs? How does one combat fixed ideas in closed minds? Obviously, the answer is that one cannot. The detractors of Fantasy and other forms of Role-Playing Games will remain. In the battle for survival, however, the Bill of Rights also remains staunchly before us. Thus protected from these witch-burners and book-banners, you can use logic, common sense, and a fine personal example to combat the wrongs which they constantly wreak upon the whole community of RPG enthusiasts. Never argue with such individuals, but feel confident to debate in public forum with them. Their "facts" boil down to beliefs or fallacies. Belief is fine, but one cannot force one's religious beliefs upon anyone—not in this country or most other democracies, anyway. Educators, broad-minded ecclesiastics, and parents need only be shown the materials in question to have some inkling of the ludicrous nature of most charges leveled against role-playing games. Most players in the area are likely to be outstanding students and churchgoers; by and large, the typical RPG player is a model citizen at any age. Parents, teachers, and associates can and will testify to that. As a parent myself, I can say that I was always delighted to know what my children were doing, and with whom. Playing games keeps children out of many other activities of far less desirable sort to say the least, and the association is beneficial, as players are generally of high intelligence and of a decent sort.

In the long run you will never accomplish much beyond showing the normal citizen that game playing is innocuous at worst, beneficial at best, and a mere hobby entertainment generally. Those who don't like it shouldn't do it. If they have children it is their parental right to see to it that their minor children avoid doing it too. However, these folk cannot force others to think as they do, believe in what they think true, go to their church, read what they read, act as they act. The Ayatollah Khomeini calls the U.S. the "Great Satan." How many of his same persuasion believe that with him? Numbers don't weigh much in this regard, and that applies to fanatical critics here in this country as well. Avoid confrontation with them, but stand your ground if need be. Truth in the matter of RPGs is very much self-evident, but you must be armed with facts too.

Next there are the odd groups who are "worried about the psychologi-

cal implications of role-playing games." Teenagers "lose touch with reality" or even commit suicide because of role-playing games, such folk assert—baselessly! "Evidence" for them consists of lurid newspaper headlines and sensation-seeking "professionals" who send out materials or hit the news media to promote their own causes (and possibly their finances) by touting the "dangers" of the RPG and such other terrible things as rock music videos and Bugs Bunny cartoons. Whew! I sure wish we lived back in the good old days when we had nothing worse than ignorance and the Black Plague to worry about. We all know that before we had comic books, TV, and motion pictures to promote violence, mankind lived an idyllic existence without crime, murder, and warfare.

Seriously, there is a big problem, and it isn't something as minor as games. RPG enthusiasts, though, seem to have a far better record than the average citizen as far as that goes. Studies by scientists sent to TSR, Inc., some years ago showed that the incidence of suicide amongst teenage FRPG players was about  $\frac{1}{50}$ th to  $\frac{1}{200}$ th the national average. Another such study indicated that the likelihood of violent anti-social behavior (felonies/murder) by FRPG players was also somewhere about  $\frac{1}{50}$ th to  $\frac{1}{200}$ th the national average.

Yellow journalism is a big factor in getting publicity for the danger mongers. After all, ratings pay the freight, and sensationalist attacks on a well-known product or activity attract attention and get ratings. One of these days somebody pulling this well-known tactic of attacking what is famous is going to get in big legal trouble, and that will slow things down. Meanwhile, we have to suffer. I believe that there would still be a fair amount of media time spent on "investigative" reports about games if it was believed that ratings warranted it. What do facts matter? If you doubt that, take a look at the headlines in the tabloids sold in supermarkets. Tabloid TV exists too. How does the serious RPG enthusiast combat it all? This is very much germane to the Master GM, for he or she must to a large measure represent the whole participant group.

The *60 Minutes* interview done with Ed Bradley was one which verged on what is spoken of above. Interestingly, two of the parents of the so-called game-related suicides wrote directly to me refuting both newspaper claims and what the TV program seemed to assert as fact. Both said that the children involved benefited from playing FRPGs and enjoyed that activity. They both also related that the suicide was despite the game, not because of it. Sad to say, although Mr. Bradley was sent copies of both letters, *60 Minutes* never aired them. Although a most distasteful topic, it

is one which must be faced, because teenage suicide is endemic in the U.S. The rate is horrific, and there seems to be little being done to assist young people, the most likely group to be so moved as to inflict death upon themselves. It is important to debunk charges against role-playing because there are real causes which must be found and acted upon so as to lower the rate of suicide. Stop superstitious foolishness and seek scientific answers. I believe it is almost a parallel of the Dark Ages when all disease was attributed to evil spirits and the like. Disease ran rampant, of course. Here we go again having to combat witch-burners. The weight of medical evidence and scientific fact are the best ammunition to use.

It is unlikely that reputable mental-health professionals will ever indicate that any game is dangerous to a normal, healthy individual. I spoke before the Combined Academies of American and Canadian Child Psychiatry at their annual meeting in Toronto a few years ago, and I didn't hear any such claims at all. Fantasy has a role in the development of children. Games are potentially useful in that regard.

Robert Lindner wrote *The Fifty-Minute Hour*, and in that book dealing with some of his most interesting cases, Lindner included one case he called "The Jet-Propelled Couch." The individual being treated by Lindner, a clinical psychologist, was a government scientist of critical employment in the space program who was gradually losing touch with reality because of his involvement with a science fiction world (milieu) he was creating, a galactic empire with space travel and all that. Lindner proceeded to become involved *with* the patient in the fantasy, because according to Lindner *a shared fantasy tends to preclude loss of reality*. Lindner actually did begin to lose himself in the fantasy, but at that juncture his patient had recovered and remarked on Lindner's preoccupation with such make-believe. So much for "loss of touch with reality," for what is more shared than interaction with an RPG amidst a group of other enthusiasts?

"Obsessive behavior" is another charge which is often brought up. People tend to like different things, and what they like they do a lot—probably to excess *in the eyes of those who don't happen to share that particular interest*. Most such excess occurs in areas we call sports, hobbies, crafts, or entertainment. When faced with the charge of "obsessiveness," lack of scholastic performance is too often the root of the problem. "Junior played games rather than doing his homework. He must be obsessed with that game."

Unfortunately there aren't college scholarships for RPG excellence, as

there are for hitting, kicking, or throwing balls. There are no high school or college games programs. If there were, fewer parents would complain. Make sure that you and your players aren't guilty of ignoring schoolwork, and you're halfway home.

Next pick out a popular and accepted recreational pursuit. Golf is one that always lends itself to us. Did you know that golfers are the ones most frequently killed by lightning stroke? That's true, and it's because they play during all kinds of weather, including thunderstorms. If that isn't obsessive behavior, then what is? Who worries about golfers? Tennis elbow, shin splints, football injuries, and all the rest seem to be matters of no concern alongside the "dangers" of RPG participation. Well, lack of exercise and possible missed homework assignments aside, it is quite safe to say that it is about as innocuous a form of entertainment as one can imagine. Educators and parents might well testify to the many benefits of such activity in the areas of reading, group cooperation, and social interaction, problem solving, creativity, imagination, art, mathematics, and so on. Line them up to do so if you can.

One group seemingly concerned about the "dangers" of FRPG is driven by one individual who in my opinion might well be ridden by guilt. That individual supposedly wasn't aware of her child's participation in a FRPG for two years, and now, after his suicide, the blame is placed upon the game he played rather than on lack of parental supervision and concern. As is obvious, attacks of this nature are emotional and must be approached with extreme caution. Transferring guilt from oneself to another or an inanimate object isn't anything new, and FRPGs are a scapegoat, but to simply and calmly point this out might incur emotional backlash among sympathetic members of the audience. Better to have the arguments against the activity set forth and answer them on their face value than to suggest that the reason *why* those unfounded charges are leveled against something as beneficial as participation in role-playing games in the first place completely discredits the attackers and their arguments.

Can one spend the money won in a MONOPOLY game? Does success there train one for financial dealings in real estate? Of course not. Well, the evils, activities, and "training" which come from the participation in RPGs are just the same, make-believe; but in playing RPGs you are usually working together as a group, not trying to eliminate the others through forcing them into "Bankruptcy." Detractors of role-playing are

actually bankrupt of ideas; cynically, misguidedly, or emotionally using RPGs for their own ends when they attack them.

But what about those people who believe RPGs are dangerous because they have heard "something" bad about them? There are a lot of honest and caring people with intelligence and open minds who happen to fall into the category of being unsure about role-playing but who, recalling that it might have dangerous side effects, stay away from the activity and discourage role-playing for children. Chess was once thought to be a pretty useless or dangerous activity too, and all types of card playing as well. (In fact, that's still *damned* by some groups.) Point those facts out.

It's no great wonder many people are ignorant when it comes to facts about RPGs. They haven't had a chance to learn the truth about them. Role-playing games are only about fifteen years old, and a few people also seem to like to misrepresent them vociferously. A brief, clear exposition of what is involved in game play will help. Then offer to have the individuals observe a game in progress, attend a convention, or at least review game materials. If possible, have parents of RPG enthusiasts—or, perhaps even better, parents who are also RPGers—speak to other parents who are uninformed. Peer speaking to peer is most effective. Support from community, school, and/or church officials might be possible. Find out by asking.

Finally, I wish to point out that there is no player organization which defends role-playing games. RPG enthusiasts need a pro-gaming association to address this concern. There are the game publishers, of course, but they are all small companies busy trying to succeed and with relatively few resources to combat the menace. Game-enthusiast groups are formed to play games and sponsor conventions, not waste their energy on such matters. Besides, most if not all such groups are totally unprepared to handle high pressure and propaganda. Perhaps this is a shortcoming which can be rectified in the future. Is there a Grand Master GM out there who is willing to take up the gauntlet? That individual might become a true King Arthur with respect to role-playing.

There is material available from the Game Manufacturers Association. It is aimed at anti-RPG activity and is very useful to the GM/group in defending against these unfounded attacks which seem to pop up continually and randomly. However, because GAMA is a trade association whose members produce role-playing games, RPG, and wargame miniatures, board wargames, etc., it is not as effective in combating such



attacks as would be an organization not earning its livelihood by means of publishing/manufacturing the products under attack. Contact GAMA, % Mr. Howard Barasch, Southgames Distributor, Carrollton, TX 75006 and ask for their handout, "The Assault on Role-Playing Games."

The Role-Playing Game Association (RPGA), a player network sponsored and run by TSR, Inc., has recently rejected involvement with a group seeking to provide pro-RPG information. William Flatt and several others currently plan formation of an independent player organization with an advocate committee. William Flatt can be contacted about this by writing to him at: 8032 Locust Ave., Miller, IN 46403. Canadian readers might wish to contact committee member Pierre Savoie, M.Sc., 22B Harris Ave., Toronto, Ont., M4C 1P4, Canada. I believe that extensive information is available from them.



## Appendix B



# Out of the Mundane, Into Realms of Adventure

Escape. The heroic achievement. Immortality. Ever since the beginning of civilization we have sought after these quests. Our method of escape from the mundane world has moved from tales told round a fire to an entertainment industry that no one a century ago could have foreseen. Books in color everywhere, motion pictures, radio, compact disc players, television, the home computer! We have amusement and theme parks galore and can travel to just about anywhere in a short time and for relatively low cost. Technology has given us time for escape and amusement, and because of this, they exist.

As the master of a unique entertainment vehicle, you must know the roots of the mythic adventure, the basic themes and storytelling devices which are universal and powerfully compelling even in a world of CD players and home computers. Entire libraries are filled with studies of the legends and tales of cultures all over the world, each bearing certain similar aspects which nearly every person may recognize as something they heard in childhood or read about in school.

The heroic theme has existed since before early man began to record his thoughts. This mythic craving in us is universal and can be found in most literature as well as in other forms of entertainment. We all have some inner desire to experience heroism, to be heroic. Joseph Campbell, renowned for his *Hero With a Thousand Faces*, defines certain components of the heroic myth most aptly. Interestingly, although I was totally unaware of it at the time, these were, in most part, included in the thesis of the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS work, the first role-playing game created. Consider the following parts of the mythic adventure:

The *hero* (or aspiring hero) receives a *call to adventure*. It might be an indirect beckoning, harsh circumstances forcing heroic questing, or something demanding it from inside the protagonist, no matter.

With, or soon after, the call to adventure comes the *guide*. It may be an object such as a book, something magical, a creature, a spirit, or some strange or powerful person. The hero, having heard the call, begins on his quest with the guide.

Now we have come to the *threshold of the adventure*. This might be questing in known realms or in places that are absolutely exotic or alien. They might be the so-called underworld of crime or the underworld of the dead, the society of the ultra-rich or activities of secret agents, labyrinths or labyrinthine places above or below ground, the stars or the underseas of just about anyplace unfamiliar.

The adventure includes a *difficult task*, some Herculean feat or seemingly impossible accomplishment in the face of danger and great odds. This difficult task also has in its (microcosmic) fulfillment the promise of a greater (macrocosmic) fulfillment. For instance, stop the enemy's advance here and the war is won. If they should pass, the whole cause of freedom is lost. When considering so difficult a task, what man, hero or not, could succeed?

Now comes the *supernatural assistance*—some magical aid, a powerful ally, a supernatural bride. Through such assistance the hero is able to overcome the immediate challenges.

It is during this phase of the adventure that the hero makes *father atonement*—whether to the actual parent, a father figure somehow rejected or betrayed, or a government or lofty principle not honored or upheld.

Then the hero receives the *token* or badge of his heroism. It is an accolade of some definite sort—acknowledgment, a reward in title or

power of magical or non-magical sort, or combinations of these prizes and honors.

Now comes the great triumph, the *apotheosis*. The hero has succeeded against all odds and in the face of the most determined and perilous opposition. This is the climax of the adventure.

In the anticlimactic portion of the whole we see the hero in his *return* to his original place or state, but not in the same state, as it were. He has attained something beyond the norm. He has been resurrected—from physical death, mental oblivion, spiritual Hades, whatever. He left a not-hero and returned a hero, one apart from all others not of that stamp.

The return may be permanent or transitory, but the hero has come back to show that the *adventure has been completed*. Perhaps there will be scores to settle, reckonings to be made, and certainly *acknowledgment of heroism* from those witnessing the return and completion of the adventure. Only then is the *cycle united*, with the unheroic past closed to meet the heroic present.

The acknowledged hero receives a sort of immortality too. At the very least, the larger-than-life hero is memorialized by men and thus made immortal by the telling and retelling of his heroism. Perhaps a part of the adventure was an eventual transformation to some undying form such as a mountain or star, or else transfiguration into an eternal spirit force or oneness with an immortal existence beyond the kin of mankind.

In such a mythic recounting are embodied the concepts of escape, the heroic achievement, and immortality. Analyze the plot of the Star Wars saga, and you'll easily pick out the elements of a mythic adventure. Look at the D&D game and all of the RPGs that have come after it. In all that have survived and flourished are present these critical elements of myth.

It should be clear that the appeal of the role-playing game is in its mythical elements. It offers escape, heroism, adventure, and immortality of some sort. So why is the general appeal of RPGs not as great as the need for such storytelling would indicate?

Much of the entertainment we have available to us utilizes the mythic adventure formula in its crafting, so there is competition immediately. Think of the Star Wars example already given. Also, some people are simply too busy, preoccupied, or mentally or emotionally incapable of participation in such mythic adventure on a level other than the totally vicarious or abstract.

The potential appeal of role-playing games is broad, but actual par-

ticipation in the activity is narrower than one might expect, for a reason that is purely speculative but whose logic seems sound. Although the heroic adventure appeals to everyone, most people do not possess even sufficient innate heroism to dare so much as pretend actively toward heroism. For instance, consider children's games of make-believe. In such activity, a few of the children push their pretending to the limits while the majority move toward more mundane parts and role-assumptive play such as playing "house" or "family."

If only one-quarter of all children were not of the docile, non-heroic predisposition, there should be a very large number of role-playing game enthusiasts actively pursuing the hobby. Well, that reasoning is not quite sound. Some of those seeking heroic achievement do so in reality, by career and/or vocational activity—sports, military service, research science, and so forth. They would probably enjoy RPG activity (and indeed, many do so) if time permitted them to include it in their lives.

Other people, the majority of would-be heroes, become so enmeshed in the mundane affairs of life that they forget the longing that they once knew. They end up being audience members of other entertainment forms, especially those that demand little direct participation while offering as much of the mythic adventure as possible in that circumstance. For them, reading a book, or watching a film or television presentation, or perhaps playing the computer game is sufficient. Certain role-assumptive activities such as the murder-mystery weekend and party games attract the more daring of the once would-be heroes.

Those two categories account for most of the potential RPG enthusiasts who did not take that path to enjoyment. What of the ones who did? We know that there are millions of role-playing game enthusiasts in the world—perhaps as many as five million in the United States and Canada alone. There are roughly two hundred fifty million people in these two nations, so about 2% of the total population plays RPGs.

Is that, realistically speaking, the maximum potential audience? No—not even the maximum audience for the currently available games in their present forms. The number of players right now could probably be doubled without much difficulty if there were capable GMs available to serve them. In the mythic sense the heroes are waiting and all they need to do is hear the call to adventure and follow the guide—you, the GM! You need to assist these individuals along the high road to RPG adventuring.

There are many genres, and the multiplicity is due to varied tastes. No GM can be expected to run campaigns in all of the major genres. In fact,

handling more than one campaign verges on being a heroic act itself, unless assistants and/or co-GMs are involved. What can be done by each existing GM to broaden the audience is to actively talk about and introduce RPG activity to anyone who is interested. Follow this by encouraging interested persons to create a gaming milieu in some genre, especially one that differs from those already actively pursued in RPG playing in the area, if the individual is willing and able to do so.

By assisting the neophyte GM in creation of a campaign, and by aiding him or her and the player group by initial player activity in the fledgling campaign, you will have expanded the potential of the game in many ways. You will have also moved another step along the route toward your goal of mastery. By helping to train a new GM and new players, you will have gained new understanding and renewed old knowledge.

Armed thus, you can further exercise your mastery in a number of other ways. Just as the mythic components of the role-playing-game experience enable you to understand what an adventure needs to consider, the scenario is the microcosm of the campaign; the campaign the microcosm of the game system. Before a body of work existed on the subject of understanding RPGs, the aspiring master could begin his quest just about anywhere. Today he must work up from the bottom in order to have a strong probability of success.

By understanding and conveying to others the basic appeal of the RPG, you are beginning to learn from the bottom up. Having to train others tests your basic knowledge, makes you learn what you don't know and recall what you do know. The RPG asks much from GMs, the principals in the play of the system. What do GMs ask of players? The promise, the reward, offered to GMs and players too is alike. Entertainment, enjoyment, fun, escape, heroism, magic, suspense, excitement, danger, and so much more—all from within a small box or set of books.

In all that you do in your role as GM, you are going to provide for the players a form of escape, heroic opportunity, adventure, and the potential for legendary status within the annals of the game and its player characters. With the mythic quest in mind, you will set about to develop the microcosm of the adventure scenario so that it at least in part reflects the larger epic adventures within the overall campaign milieu. These epics, in turn, have the mythic reflection of the macrocosmic campaign.

Before moving on, however, it is useful to consider the impact of the heroic opportunity as a steady diet. Nobody can be heroic all of the time. Even the best of us are simply frail humans, and we must be given time off

from the burden of having to perform heroically day in and day out. An example of how burdensome a role can be is best illustrated by the *paladin* character in the ADVANCED D&D game. The altruistic, heroic nature of a *paladin* can sometimes be well role-played by certain dedicated individuals, but the unrelenting nature of the character type can cause other player participants to grow weary and become annoyed if their characters are forced to interact constantly with too-rigid adherence to the defined characterization of the character role.

In considering how to deal with this sort of potential problem, remember that drama is heightened when it is broken by moments of comic relief. The finest authors recognize this fact and use it in their work. Because the GM deals with all aspects of the "lives" of the characters of the RPG, it is necessary on occasion to provide comic relief and exposure to the mundane to force the game characters out of the mythic frame of mind. By experiencing levity, dealing with the mundane, and possibly having to interact with the vulgar and seamy, the occurrence of mythic drama is heightened and brought into stark, believable relief once again.

You need not explain the appeal of the role-playing game to your player group, nor do you need to do so for prospective members, at least not in technical terms. It is sufficient that you, the masterful GM, know and understand the whole. It isn't secret information, and masterful players will certainly discover the facts for themselves—possibly with your encouragement. Explanations are as much for your use as theirs, to help assure that all goes as it should. They have no bearing on the reason for player participation in the RPG experience. As far as the players are concerned, the game is fun. It offers escape from the unexciting routines of school, job, domestic responsibilities, and the other mundane aspects of real life. With the experiencing of the adventurous make-believe comes the social interaction of a group of like-minded individuals. A role-playing game is a shared participatory experience and is even more enjoyable because it is shared: a chance for mythic, heroic experience with a body of boon companions. In this regard the role-playing game offers something no other entertainment form can.



## Appendix C



### The Master's Library

While it is quite possible to be expert in games mastership without recourse to works beyond a broad, relatively complete RPG system, Mastery demands that more be done. The Master/Grand Master GM must have a well-stocked library with reference, research, and inspirational works ready for his or her use at the moment inspiration nibbles — strikes seldom occur! Because of the vast diversity of genres, and the diversity of times possible, many exact works could not be specified, although I selected a few titles from my own library as examples. First, here is a general list of essential books, which every Master's library should contain.

Unabridged dictionary

Historical atlas (large)

World atlas

Encyclopedia (best possible edition)



Historical timetables

Encyclopedia of costume

Dictionary of battles

Thesaurus

Atlas of the universe

Weapons books

The above forms the nucleus around which the library is built. Although there will be different rates of usage depending upon the game system and its available supplemental material, as well as your particular penchants, none of these books will gather dust. From this core expand in whatever direction you wish. Here are some examples:

Boissonade, Prosper. *Life and Work in Medieval France*. New York: Dorset Press.

Brawn and Schneider. *Historical Costume in Pictures*. New York: Dover.

Broadbent, Michael. *The Great Vintage Wine Book*. New York: Knopf.

Byrne, Mrs. *Mrs. Byrne's Dictionary*. New Jersey: University Books/Citadel Press.

Cavendish, Richard, editor. *Mythology: An Illustrated Encyclopedia*. New York: Crescent.

1811 *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue, The*. London: Bibliophile Books.

Donnelly, Ignatius. *Atlantis, the Antediluvian World*. New York: Dover.

Friedman, Col. Richard et al. *Advanced Technology Warfare*. New York: Crescent.

Glut, Donald F. *The Dinosaur Dictionary*. New York: Bonanza Books.

Gordsmith-Carter, George. *Sailing Ships (and Sailing Craft)*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Grun, Bernard. *Timetables of History*. New Jersey: Hammond.

Harbottle, Thomas. *The Dictionary of Battles*. New York: Stein and Day.

Keightley, Thomas. *The World Guide to Gnomes, Fairies, Elves (And Other Little People)*. New York: Avenel Books.

Kunz, George Frederick. *Curious Lore of Precious Stones*. New York: Dover.

Macaulay, David. *Castle*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

———. *Cathedral*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

- . *City*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- . *Pyramid*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- . *Underground*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Moore, Patrick. *New Concise Atlas of the Universe*. Chicago: Rand McNally.
- Newmark, Maxim. *Dictionary of Foreign Words and Phrases*. New York: Philosophical Library.
- Robbins, Rossell Hope. *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology*. New York: Bonanza Books.
- Schumann, Walter. *Gemstones of the World*. New York: Sterling Publishing.
- Shepard, Leslie. *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology*. New York: Avon.
- Sloan, Samuel. *Sloan's Victorian Buildings*. New York: Dover.
- Stratton, Arthuz. *The Orders of Architecture*. London: Studio Editions.
- Sykes, Christopher Simon. *Private Palaces*. New York: Viking.
- Turnbull, Stephen. *The Book of the Medieval Knight*. New York: Crown.
- Weapons and Warfare* (24 volumes). New York: Phoebus Publishing Company/BPC Publishing, Ltd.
- Wilkinson, Frederick. *Arms and Armor*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap.

Some further examples, some drawn from fiction, will serve to round out an ideal collection. When an author is listed "generally," it means that he or she has a large body of work which will be equally useful and entertaining to a Master.

- |                  |  |
|------------------|--|
| Far-Future SF:   | Isaac Asimov—Foundation Trilogy<br>A. E. Van Vogt— <i>Weapon Shops of Isher</i><br>L. Ron Hubbard—Mission Earth Dekology<br>The Fleet Series ("Shared Universe" Anthologies) |
| Near-Future SF:  | Any Future Wars/Weapons books<br>Robert Heinlein (generally)<br>A. E. Van Vogt— <i>Slan</i>  |
| Science Fantasy: | Brian Aldiss— <i>Starship</i><br>Roger Zelazny—Amber Series<br>P. J. Farmer—Created Universes Series<br>A. Merritt (generally)   |
| Horror:          | H. P. Lovecraft (generally)<br>Any Occult Encyclopedia   |

	Any Witchcraft/Demonology/Magic Dictionary or Encyclopedia
	Any Poltergeist/Ghost Accounts
Espionage:	James Bond Books
	John LeCarré (generally)
	Alistair Maclean (generally)
	Graham Greene (generally)
Mystery:	Annotated Sherlock Holmes
	<i>Murder Most Foul</i> —Warden, Rob, and Groves, Martha, editors. Ohio University Press/Swallow Press (Chicago)
Multi-Genre Systems:	(Erroneously called <i>Generic</i> )
	H. Beam Piper— <i>Lord Kalvan of Otherwhen</i>
	Piers Anthony— <i>Split Infinity</i>

Time travel and fantasy are too broad to even begin to make recommendations of any sort other than to direct the reader to some areas of reading. All of the above apply to time travel or multi-genre systems. Time travel requires reference works from pre-history through ancient, medieval, Renaissance, and Victorian Era to the WW I to Modern period plus ability to move into the near and far future. Dr. Who books and H. Beam Piper books are useful, as is a collection of RPGs in the genres and time periods to be covered. If probability travel is also included, then one must delve into fantasy as well. In that regard, works on mythology, fairy tales, life, weapons and castles of the medieval period, and such authors as R. E. Howard, Fritz Leiber, Poul Anderson, DeCamp & Pratt, and Michael Moorcock are essential sources of material and inspiration.

It is said that a role-playing game is only as good as its Game Master. Now there's a book especially designed and dedicated to this principal performer. Expertly written by renowned Grand Master Gary Gygax, *Master of the Game* guides Game Masters of *all* role-playing games in how to achieve their highest degree of proficiency and skill. It then stimulates them even further to excellence beyond their campaign, if it's so desired. Here's the complete Game Master experience, including chapters on:

- Preparing for the Principal Role
- The Master Milieu: Design and Maintenance
- Mastery and Modification of the Rules and Systems
- How to Master the Adventure Scenario
- Why a Campaign Fails
- How to Establish and Manage an RPG Convention
- How to Create Your Own RPG Publication
- How to Assist Others toward Master Game Mastering

For present and aspiring Game Masters, *Master of the Game* is the long-awaited companion to Gary Gygax's previous successful book, *Role Playing Mastery*. It's a guide no Game Master should be without.

**Gary Gygax** almost singlehandedly founded the entire field of role playing. He co-created DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® as well as numerous other role-playing games and accessories and is the author of several bestselling books. Presently, he lives in Clinton, Wisconsin.

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