

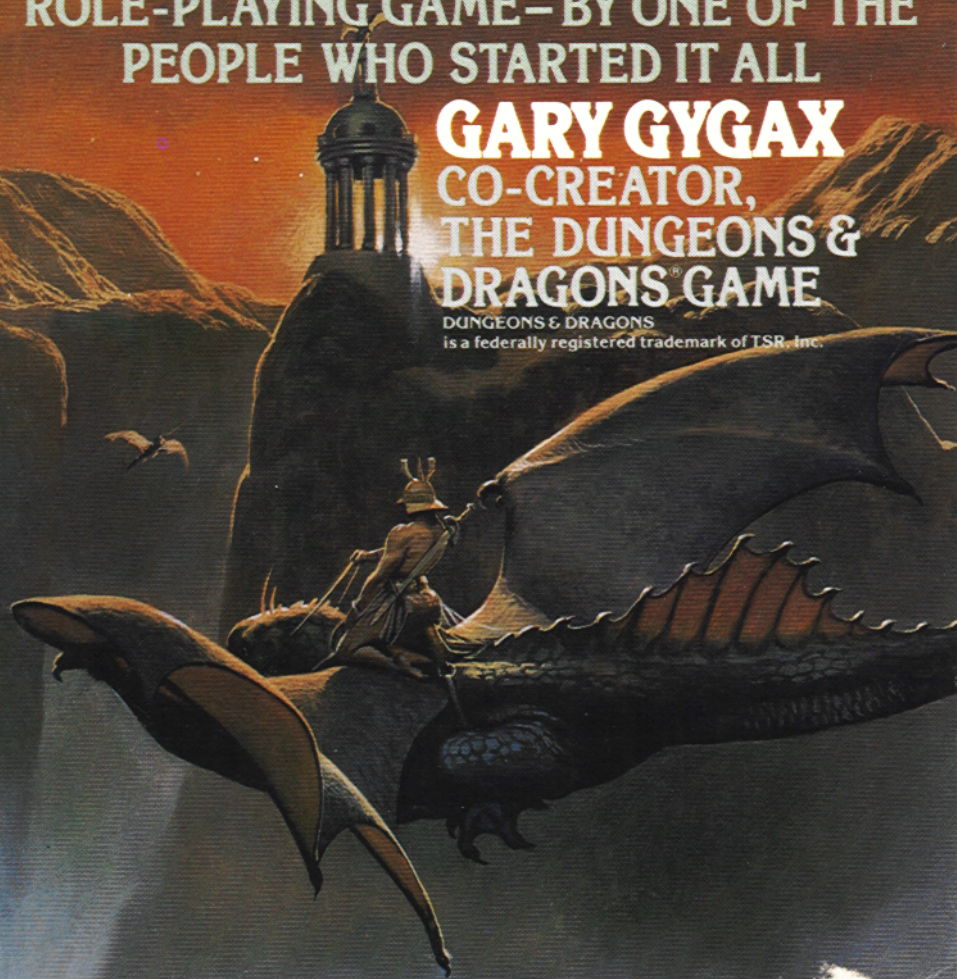
# ROLE-PLAYING MASTERY

TIPS, TACTICS AND STRATEGIES FOR  
IMPROVING YOUR PARTICIPATION IN ANY  
ROLE-PLAYING GAME—BY ONE OF THE  
PEOPLE WHO STARTED IT ALL

**GARY GYGAX**  
CO-CREATOR,  
THE DUNGEONS &  
DRAGONS® GAME

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|                | <b>ROLE-</b> |
| <b>PLAYING</b> |              |
| <b>MASTERY</b> |              |



# **ROLE- PLAYING MASTERY**

**GARY GYGAX**



**Co-Creator of the DUNGEONS &  
DRAGONS® Game**



**A PERIGEE BOOK**



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***This work is dedicated to the players of the  
DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® and ADVANCED  
DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® games, and all other role-  
playing game enthusiasts who have brought so much to  
this new form of gaming. Live long and prosper!***

# Acknowledgments

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# Preface



## WHAT IS MASTERY?

**W**hy read a book on *Role-Playing Mastery*? If you have spent hundreds of hours involved in role-playing games, you might think you are a “master” already. Well, you are no doubt good at what you do, and having fun at it, or you wouldn’t still be doing it. But unless you are part of a small, active minority, you have far more to learn than you imagine. In fact, even if you are already one of the so-called hard core aficionados, many tricks remain to be learned, and the information that this book contains will be helpful.

It is hoped (and I go so far as to assume) that interested but nonexperienced individuals will read this work prior to beginning activity in role-playing games. This will save them from the fate that has befallen so many of their fellows in the past and turned them from role-playing game (RPG) participants into uninterested parties in the space of a few frustrating and/or boring sessions of play. The greatest enemy is improper use of the game vehicle for some purpose other than its intended one. Many games are mere pastime activities, but **RPGs** are enjoyable pursuits of a sought-after nature and are hobbylike, rather than pastime creations aimed at filling an otherwise empty period of leisure. While

some games are aimed at rainy afternoons or social gatherings that might bring boredom, role-playing games are designed for and should be played under far different circumstances. Participants engage in the play of such games because they have an active desire to do so. This is because the games of this nature provide them with fun, excitement, challenge, social interaction, and much more on an ongoing basis.

Knowledgeable estimates place the number of avid players of role games in the neighborhood of three and one-half million in North America, five million worldwide. That is a lot of players, and these are enthusiasts. These figures do not include occasional participants in role-playing games. The number of persons who have played at least once is certainly twice as large as the number of enthusiasts.

A certain few of the enthusiasts have matured and developed, then strived for and attained the status of mastery of their *craft*—and certainly tomorrow's masters will include some of today's casual players as well. Mastery as a player or a game master (GM) can be achieved by anyone, despite his or her present level of expertise in or enthusiasm for role-playing games. Mastery is achieved by understanding the game system, using it fully and correctly, excelling in operation within the system, and assuring that the experience is enjoyable for all the individuals concerned. The road to mastery is neither smooth nor short, and a lot of work lies ahead of anyone setting out on the journey. Some who do set out will not reach the final destination- but, as will be demonstrated in this work, the journey itself is one worth taking regardless of how long it lasts.

As it is with other kinds of mature amusements and diversions, so it is with role-playing games: The higher the level of play, the more enjoyable the game. Simply put, mastery of role-playing is not so much an effort toward individual excellence as it is a broadening of personal knowledge, contributing to social group activity, and increasing the fun and excitement that stem from superior participation. This is when role-playing becomes captivating. When you master role-playing, you become immersed in an activity that is peerless among leisure-time pursuits.

Is it magic that strikes your fancy? The fiery breath of a dragon? Or perhaps you are captivated by blazing six-guns, the tension of an espionage mission, or the lure of the far-flung galaxies of the future! Whatever the attraction is, surviving in the aftermath of a world-shattering holocaust or tracking down the unnameable horrors that lurk in dark and remote places, you can find it within the realm of role-playing games. The entire spectrum of thrilling action and excitement is available in the comfort of your home. Better still, the adventure is shared, and actively so. You are not engaging in parallel entertainment such as watching a film with friends. You are not alone reading a book or contesting against a computer program. A role-playing game is a group-interactive activity-and a ticket to worlds of adventure for you and your friends.

The purpose of this book is to inform role-game enthusiasts of the history and scope of the role-playing hobby pursuit, to assist all participants in understanding the games, campaigns, and dynamics involved; and to inform participants of the methods of bringing play to a high level in order to enhance their enjoyment. Collaterally, the work is aimed at strengthening and building the hobby by enabling players and game masters alike to assist in this undertaking. This book is, then, both a guide to better role-playing and a rough map of the territory that encompasses creating new approaches to existing games and design and development of new entries in the field.

From the ranks of those who achieve role-playing mastery in the months and years ahead will come the next generation of game designers and authors, who will use their RPG experience and their own original ideas to create a new crop of role-playing game systems. Others who achieve mastery will accomplish nothing more than giving themselves and their friends hour upon hour—perhaps a lifetime’s worth-of the unique brand of enjoyment and excitement that results when an RPG is played the way it was meant to be played. That, in itself, is a prize that makes the long road to mastery well worth traveling. By picking up this book, you have taken the first step on that journey.



# Chapter 1



## ROLE-PLAYING: THE FOUNDATION OF FUN

**T**o begin at the beginning, it is important to know the difference between role-playing and role assumption. Role-playing can be defined as acting out a make-believe position. A child might pretend to be an adult, a male may act out the part of a female in a theatrical performance, or a game enthusiast may play the role of a secret agent. Think of role-playing as taking the position and characteristics of someone you cannot actually become at the time (or ever).

In some cases, a role that is played can or eventually will be assumed in reality. For instance, a little boy playing the father or the husband in a children's game of house might eventually become a married parent in later years. Time and education, desire and circumstances can well affect things so that a role being played at one time later becomes one that is assumed.

Role assumption is generally considered as taking a role that the individual could or might actually have. An accountant might, for

example, assume the role of a modern-day private investigator—something he could conceivably become. Role assumption is, again, the acceptance of a role that one might actually have in the future. It differs substantially from role-playing in that the latter deals with acting the part of a make-believe persona that cannot be fulfilled at the present or at any future time.

Some of the roots of role-playing games (RPGs) are grounded in clinical and academic role assumption and role-playing exercises. Long before it was transferred to and transformed into a game system, clinicians and academicians were familiar with the concept and had developed it as a tool. By encouraging subjects to “assume a role” or “play a role”—that is, act out the identity and personality of an entirely different type of person—teachers and doctors have educated and sometimes helped treat misconceptions and maladies in the participants as well as those persons who might have witnessed the activity. “Role reversal” is a popular way of expressing the activity on this level, although the role being assumed or played certainly need not be the exact reverse of one’s own identity and outlook.

The other roots of role-playing games rest in the early history of the hobby of gaming, especially in military miniatures games and, to a lesser degree, in other types of conflict simulations that were later developed. Conflict-simulation gaming has sometimes been used by academicians to step toward a hobby pursuit, but such activities as international simulations are only distantly related to role games per se. However, military miniatures game play is in the direct line of evolution; that fact cannot be disputed.

International-simulation gaming places players, typically students in high school or college, in various roles as leaders of make-believe governments. Military miniatures games, on the other hand, have participants acting as the commanders of forces, large or small, about to become engaged in or already locked in battle.

Both forms of gaming require participants to engage in a degree of role-playing, the exact role to be acted out being defined by the game. For instance, in the framework of an international-simulation game, a player might be assigned the role of minister of war of a particular state. That individual is to assume the persona of a

“hawk” and act aggressively. Other participants might have roles that would require neutral or pacifistic acting. In an international-simulation game, interaction of one sort or another exists not only between “nations” but between the individuals who run each make-believe country, and even with referees who consciously or unconsciously influence behavior in subtle ways. Play in an international-simulation game revolves around stated issues typical of those faced by actual governments. Quite often the end result of such a game is confusion and inaction or (far worse) global war.

On the other hand, military miniatures games (usually simply called miniatures by hobbyists) simulate battles or skirmishes, historical or mythical. Such gaming predates international simulation by at least decades. It is not certain when miniature figurines of soldiers and the like were first used for simulating real warfare, but chess is certainly near to such an activity and is sometimes justly referred to as a highly stylized war game. H. G. Wells, however, is usually credited as being the father of miniatures gaming. Mr. Wells formulated and published simple rules for military miniatures gaming in his book *Little Wars*, published a few years prior to World War I. This book opened a portal to what is today a very broad and often incredibly complex variety of games and game rules. These miniatures offerings enable enthusiastic gamers to re-create warfare on land, at sea, in the air, or even in space. The variety of periods ranges from ancient battles to modern warfare, with the mythical past and projected future tossed in for good measure!

One of these miniatures games, actually a booklet of game rules called *Chainmail*, made its first commercial appearance in **1971**. While it was aimed at the re-creation of the warfare of the medieval and early Renaissance period, *Chainmail* included a small section (the “Fantasy Supplement”) that instructed players on the addition of fantasy elements into the war game of the Middle Ages. Thus heroes, spell-casting wizards, fire-breathing dragons, magic swords, giants, trolls, and werewolves began to appear in miniatures games across the country.

Another groundbreaking feature was *Chainmud’s* section on man-to-man combat. This scale of activity was a departure from

published (or even “house”) miniatures gaming rules. At that time, it was usual to have a single miniature figure represent ten, twenty, fifty, or even one hundred men in the game. The one-to-one representation offered by *Chainmail* proved to be popular, especially when the fantasy components of play were used to create battles of a medieval world-that-never-was.

As co-author of *Chainmail* and sole author of the two sections mentioned, I had the duty of answering fan mail that the publisher of the work forwarded to me regularly. The book was selling well. The mail poured in. Several thousand enthusiasts were immersed in the fantasy aspects of miniature gaming . . . surprising news! Although the fact may have been only vaguely perceived as such at the time, this set of rules allowing one figure to represent one “man” was the breakthrough that led to the creation of the first role-playing game.

One other seemingly inconsequential portion of the work must be brought to your attention. In a short section pertaining to siege warfare, I instructed the reader to use paper and pencil when dealing with the underground aspects of such battles. The mining, countermining, and secret escape routes employed during sieges were to be drawn out on graph paper. David L. Arneson, then of St. Paul, Minnesota, didn’t miss that. Soon Dave and I were corresponding and exchanging ideas, and a new game took shape.

The Dungeons & Dragons Fantasy Role Playing Game was born out of *Chainmail*. The D&D game, as it is popularly called, sprang from the collaboration of Dave Arneson and yours truly in the two years immediately after *Chainmail* was published. The first version of the D&D game, now generally known as the Collector’s Edition, went on sale in January 1974. By a year later, some 1,000 copies of the game had been sold. At the time, it was the only role-playing game available.

By the time the D&D Basic Set (the second edition of the game) was published in 1977, the game had fully evolved from its “accessory” status to a game system that stood alone. Just prior to that date, and in the same time period, various other role-playing games began to appear. Today you can select from dozens of

offerings, a variety of role games that span the genres from horror to historical fiction, fantasy to science fiction.

Not only is your choice broad, but such games can be found nearly everywhere. Initially, only specialists such as game shops and hobby outlets carried the D&D game and other related products. Now many chain stores, book shops, department stores, and mail-order catalogs sell products in the role-playing-game line. From an unknown and specialized beginning, this type of game has grown to become a worldwide phenomenon enjoyed by millions. In a search for mastery of role-playing, it is important to understand why this occurred.

The most obvious answer is the one usually overlooked. At the foundation of all the other facts about “why” is the simple truth that it is 70% to play role games. All leisure-time products and services are created and sold for exactly such a reason—to bring enjoyment to those who use them. However, role-playing games, by their nature, call upon the participants to develop a deeper involvement in the activity than another type of game might require. Many of those with the time and inclination to indulge in such a demanding but fulfilling pastime become avid players. A role-playing game, instead of being an idle activity only engaged in when the weather is wet or cold, quickly becomes one of highly active and eager participation. This deep involvement and commitment shared by all enthusiasts is indeed a contributing reason for the popularity of role games.

Role-playing games are contests in which the players usually cooperate as a group to achieve a common goal rather than compete to eliminate one another from play. Chess, board games, cards, and miniatures games all pit individuals or teams against each other. Role games, in contrast, bring players together in a mutual effort to have their characters succeed or at least survive against the hostile “world” environment. It follows, then, that mastery of such games requires not only individual excellence but the ability to operate successfully within a group as well. Although most playing groups are composed of peers, some tend toward a more varied mixture, and the group that involves itself in



tournament play is certainly a mixed one. It is unquestionable that the pursuit of such games tends to be a social activity dominated by young men between fourteen and twenty-two years of age. All ages and both sexes have much to contribute, certainly, and occasional play outside the usual social peer group will bear great returns in increased understanding and ability.

Participation in role games requires mental effort, particularly imagination. This is no surprise; neither are role-playing games distinctive for this reason. Every other facet of entertainment media-books, radio, TV, and film-includes this requirement. Whether the audience is actively or passively enjoying the entertainment, those involved must be able to let their imagination run free. In fact, the more imaginative material audiences get, the more they demand with insatiable appetite.

The difference with role-playing games is that they ask *all* the participants to exercise this creative ability. When another person creates a make-believe situation and simply displays it before an audience (in the form of a book or a TV show, for instance), the audience simply absorbs the creator's imaginative output but seldom if ever has the opportunity to add its own imagination to the product. Role games, on the other hand, require participation not only in the mechanics of play but also (and to a far greater extent) in the subject matter of play. All participants actually have important and demanding creative roles in such games, and their imaginative input is increased as long-term participation evolves.

This means that an ongoing role-playing game, referred to as a *campaign*, alters from its original form into an amalgam of the printed game and the creative imagination of the group involved. As more is brought into the game by its participants during the play of *adventures*, or *scenarios*, that take place in the context of the campaign, they derive more from the game at the same time. (An adventure, for example, may begin and end within an hour or two of playing time, or it may extend for several hours of play encompassing more than one playing *session*.) Enjoyment grows as the game matures and becomes more complex and as a campaign's unique and independent personality develops. The game campaign actually alters to become the cooperative effort of the

game manufacturer and the group playing it. In this way, the game, in each particular manifestation of itself, takes on a life of its own.

Some people have loudly criticized certain motion pictures, television shows, and literature for fostering a permissive or encouraging attitude toward violence. Recently, role-playing games have come in for some of the same sort of complaints. However, the critics seem to overlook or disregard the supportable contention that engaging in vicarious aggressive behavior is an outlet for such tendencies in humankind. This is especially the case when one becomes more than a passive observer of such activities.

Even the most outspoken of the critics must admit that long before we had print and film media to “spread the word,” mankind was engaged in all forms of cruel and despicable behavior. To attribute war, killing, and violence to film, TV, and role-playing games is to fly in the face of thousands of years of recorded history. In *Little Wars*, H. G. Wells pointed out that tin soldiers leave no orphans or widows and ventured the thought that if more people were busy “fighting” such “little wars,” they would have no time for big (real) ones. While definitive studies of the topic are not yet available, the initial evidence points toward the likelihood of less aggressive and violent behavior among RPG participants. Two reports mentioned to me indicate that in the group of RPG hobbyists, the incidence of such behavior is fifty to two hundred times smaller than is typical of the populace at large.

Certainly, those who are or aspire to be role-playing masters do not have violent or aggressive personalities because of their participation in role-playing games. They understand that the conflict and violence in such games are only simulations, not meant to be translated into real-life experiences or used as an excuse for such behavior. A master player or game master does not allow—in fact, never gives a conscious thought to allowing—actions taken in the context of the game to dictate or affect his or her activities in the real-world environment. A master knows the difference between role-playing, role assumption, and real life and never mixes one of these with another. This is the best, and indeed the only, way to get the utmost benefit out of each activity.



# Chapter 2



## THE MASTER PLAYER

**T**he player's path to role-playing mastery begins with a thorough understanding of the rules of the game, followed by the selection of what sort of player character (PC) to portray in a given game situation. The order here is important, for if you put the cart before the horse, so to speak, you will have trouble heading in the direction you should be going.

### UNDERSTANDING THE RULES

Knowing the rules of the game is not nearly as simple as committing the relevant passages to memory, because memorization does not bring understanding. It is not only important to know what is written in the rules but also to perceive how the parts of the rules fit together and work in harmony with each other. This latter task is certainly achievable, but it is not easy.

From the standpoint of the game author, rules for role games are necessarily lengthy and complex. This is because they seek to structure life in some make-believe form. Whether they are dealing with fanciful magic and beasts, or with modern weapons and politics, the rules attempt to create a milieu that works as logically

and realistically as that in which we actually live. That most rules do succeed at this is indicative of both their authors' skill and the desire of the participants to be entertained by adventures of the make-believe sort.

Because of the incredible scope of any RPG, the rules for a given game are usually either too short or too long. Imagine trying to describe life to another person-trying to detail twentieth-century society, in writing, in terms that will enable the reader to understand and function within that society. This may not be a horribly difficult task if you're communicating with one of your contemporaries; his frame of reference and yours are pretty much the same before you start. But what if the reader is a seventeenth-century American colonist? The problem is further complicated by another factor. The reader might not be willing to spend much time in studying your instructions. Or, on the other hand, he just might be so interested that every word you write will be eagerly devoured. With such an analogy in mind, think of the problems that face the writers of role-game rules. Not only must they offer fun and excitement, they must describe the make-believe surroundings well enough to enable participants to understand all aspects of "life" within their milieu.

If the setting is not based on our own reality, then the rules must develop and describe their make-believe portions as if they were real. Magic, spaceships, dragons, ray guns, vampires, mutants, psionic powers, aliens, and all the rest must be given parameters. Quantification allows participants to understand and relate to these things. Similarly, details of actual things must be described in terms of game mechanics. How effective is body armor against various types of weapons? What can the weapons do? How fast can a vehicle accelerate? How does one do something within the parameters of the game? The more contemporary the period being covered by the game, the greater the amount of detail the participants will demand. The author walks the fine line between too much information and too little. The game is too much if simply reading the rules is a mind-boggling undertaking. It is too little if, once they are read, the rules fail to provide the material necessary to ongoing play. And because each reader has his own unique

definitions of “too much” and “too little,” it is the nature of the beast that rules can never-no, never- be just right.

Whichever case exists in a given set of RPG rules, you still must be thoroughly conversant with what is written. If the reader is forced to begin with inadequate material, he must spend time and effort understanding the bases for the structure and devising logical corollaries. Where voluminous rules exist, then the reader must absorb them. Both cases require patience and understanding, and the understanding extends not only to the written rules but to what lies between the lines as well. This is the *spirit* of the game. Spirit is evident in every RPG. To identify the spirit of the game, you must know what the game rules say, be able to absorb this information, and then interpret what the rules imply or state about the spirit that underlies them.

The spirit of a game cannot be expressly defined in a sentence or a paragraph, and any game designer who attempts to do so is defeating his own purpose. The spirit of an RPG pervades all the statistics, mechanics, and descriptions that make up the actual rules; it is everywhere and nowhere in particular at the same time. A game master or player who simply absorbs all the rules and uses them to play out a game adventure may be able to achieve expertise in the play of the game, but in the final analysis, he is doing no more than going through the motions-unless he also perceives, understands, and appreciates the spirit that underlies all those rules.

For example purposes (and despite already having made the point that the spirit of a game cannot be defined in so many words), I shall attempt to characterize the spirit of the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons game. This is a fantasy RPG predicated on the assumption that the human race, by and large, is made up of good people. Humans, with the help of their demi-human allies (dwarfs, elves, gnomes, etc.), are and should remain the predominant force in the world. They have achieved and continue to hold on to this status, despite the ever-present threat of evil, mainly because of the dedication, honor, and unselfishness of the most heroic humans and demi-humans-the characters whose roles are taken by the players of the game. Although players can take the

roles of “bad guys” if they so choose, and if the game master allows it, evil exists in the game primarily as an obstacle for player characters to overcome. If they succeed in doing this, as time goes on, player characters become more experienced and more powerful—which enables them to contest successfully against increasingly stronger evil adversaries. Each character, by virtue of his or her chosen profession, has strengths and weaknesses distinctly different from those possessed by other types of characters. No single character has all the skills and resources needed to guarantee success in all endeavors; favorable results can usually only be achieved through group effort. No single player character wins, in the sense that he or she defeats all other player characters; the goal of the forces of good can only be attained through cooperation, so that victory is a group achievement rather than an individual one.

## **YOUR PLAYER CHARACTER**

Whether you are playing a certain game for the first time or not, and regardless of whether the PC you select is an easy one to portray or a difficult one, choice of the player character is a vitally important matter. Particular attention must be paid to this activity—again, with a thorough understanding of the rules in mind. Certain rules cover a PC’s selection and development as well as describe opportunities for and limitations on those PCs. The strengths and weaknesses of each PC choice possible within the game should be known and understood. Simply put, the PC to be chosen, created, and developed is YOU in the game milieu. Furthermore, it might be one of several PCs you have in that or another game.

I have overheard people seriously conversing about role-playing games. These nonparticipants had no intention of taking part because they were fearful that the process would reveal too much about their actual personalities. What these people don’t realize is that players generally prefer to choose and develop a character type that is not similar to one’s true personality, and most games are designed so as to encourage this sort of selection. A master

gamer will understand that one of the most intriguing aspects of RPGs is the opportunity to portray a character that bears no resemblance to his actual persona. In some cases, depending on the particular game or the result the player desires from the activity, it may be appropriate or even necessary to reflect one's true self in the choice of a PC, but the general statement still holds.

It is always useful to explore the game system by playing different types of characters (not simultaneously, of course, but at different times). Play develops knowledge of the game, and playing various types of player characters broadens the participant's understanding of the workings of the game system. For instance, any enthusiast desiring to become a master of the AD&D game system should have played extensively each of the character types provided in the *Players Handbook* and *Unearthed Arcana*, as well as participating as a PC of nonhuman stock (dwarf, elf, gnome, etc.). Between experiencing the play of one's own characters and observing the play of other character types by associates, the knowledge gained will enable the participant to be expert at least with respect to his grasp of the approaches to problem solving offered by the classes and races of the game.

Some inferences about the goals of a specific game system can be drawn from an examination of the types of characters available for players to portray, and from a deeper look into the fundamental structure for the selection and development of PCs. The different character types may be defined by profession, with little or no crossover in skills from one profession to another. For instance, the fighter and the magic-user are two of the character professions in the AD&D game. A fighter is unable to cast magic spells and relies mainly on his strength and weapon prowess, while a magic-user is quite the opposite—a character who can cast spells and whose skill in this area is far superior to his physical skills. Or, in a skill-based system, characters may begin as a homogeneous group, with each PC gradually becoming differentiated from the others as new or improved skills and abilities are acquired. Regardless of which of these basic systems is used in the game being played, the aspiring master player should try to understand the

differences and similarities in each character type's approach to solving the problems posed by the game.

For instance, the AD&D game uses a character system based on profession, or "class." In that game, the direct, highly physical approach is embodied in the fighter and cavalier classes. The magic-user class offers the indirect, possibly intellectual approach—a sort of mixture of artillery and superscience. Between these two extremes lies the cleric class, with its mixture of direct and indirect action (being able to use both heavy weapons and heavy magic). Finally, the thief class presents a manner of approach that is basically individualistic and unobserved (as differing from indirect). Of course, other PC types and the nonhuman races add to the mix. If the AD&D game has a single obvious shortcoming, it is the attempt to present so many facets of the whole world to its participants that players lose sight of the reason for all these classes of PCs. Because the game is so extensively detailed and reflects a fantasy milieu in world-scale terms, there is no meaningful level of character success that is achievable with respect to the world community. That is, no matter how powerful a PC becomes, the choices for the player are but two: Continue to use the character as an adventurer, or retire the character from active play and have the figure become a tool for use by the Game Master (GM).

The fantasy setting, as well as others, often allows only limited choices of this sort. This is not necessarily wrong or limiting to the enjoyment of play. With complex systems, however, such settings do encourage the creation of new approaches to the solving of game problems. Again, this is not necessarily wrong, and the activity might well be useful, but the designer of new approaches must understand what is being accomplished and the motives for the creation of the new PC approach. Each game system has a limited field of action for play. It might be espionage, fantasy adventure, survival in a hostile environment, exploration and trade. No matter. What isn't included within the scope of the system is not covered. Minor additions can often be accommodated within a well-written game system. Devising a limited addi-



tion or change for use in a specific campaign is understandable. Creation of a new approach to the game through a different sort of PC having new skills is likewise acceptable. Acceptability, though, comes with a caveat: The new material must operate within the scope of the game as defined by its rules and spirit.

Too often, new material purporting to add to a game system is nothing more than a veiled attempt to dominate the game milieu through power, not skill. Such creativity, if it can be called that, amounts to a perversion of the game. It is much like cheating at solitaire. Understanding the scope of opportunity offered to PCs by the game system will certainly discourage the intelligent player from such useless activity.

Similarly, in an understandable desire to master the play of a game, participants sometimes confuse themselves with their game personas. They think that having an extremely powerful character makes them more skilled or powerful themselves, and thus more adept at the game. However, this is not the case. Players who confuse the general welfare of the game with their self-interest (whether they do this innocently or purposely) seek to participate as elephants in a game of ants. The obvious image conveyed therefrom is not one of expertise, let alone mastery. Knowing the game system and what it offers to participants through its choice of player-character approaches to problems is crucial to good play.

Someone who intends to participate in an RPG on a casual basis can indulge himself with the selection of any sort of PC. Because role games are group activities, many participants join in casually because the rest of their group of friends and peers is involved in play. As one desiring to master RPGs from a player's standpoint, you will seldom if ever approach play so casually. The selection of a PC and its initial development is a serious business. After all, if your participation proceeds as desired, the PC you have created will be involved in play episodes for a long time. The scope of the system to be played and your attitude must be harmonious, so that the "laws" of the game will not irritate you or impede your enjoyment, and your PC will not constantly run afoul of the milieu.

Moving from the general to the particular, there are several other considerations that you will find necessary to take into account when selecting a PC type to play. Before committing yourself to a decision, determine the right answers to the following questions.

1. Does the GM encourage or discourage the PC choice you are leaning toward? As the arbiter of the game milieu, a game master is well within his rights to dictate what types of PCs are or are not appropriate for inclusion in the campaign world. A hostile GM spells certain disaster to the participant bent on disregarding the direction given, whether this is done openly or subtly. Be sure to discuss approaches to creation of the PC with the GM. Listen carefully to what is said, and act accordingly.
2. What relationship will your PC bear to the balance of the group? Group needs and wants should be taken into account in your selection. If all the players in a group are selecting PC types at the same time, then they should work together and compromise if necessary to ensure that the group has a good mix of skills and abilities among its PCs. If you are creating a PC that will become a new member of an already existing group, then group needs should be uppermost in your mind. If the group is not balanced, then a PC that complements some aspect of the group, instead of aggravating or increasing the weakness or imbalance, will tend to make the group more viable when it faces conflict problems. Furthermore, your PC will have increased its chances for both survival and success. For instance, if an existing group of PCs in an AD&D game campaign is composed primarily of fighters, it's probably not a good idea to create yet another sword-swinging powerhouse; instead, opt for a PC type that has little or no representation within the group. This benefits the group by making it more well rounded and will ultimately benefit your PC on an individual basis, since the character is a special part of the group with distinctive strengths of his

or her own. Besides the appreciation and reward that come with such status, a position of strength is one that warrants special treatment. Without demanding major concessions (sure to alienate others), it is possible to gain a slight edge that will bring increasing success to your PC through cooperation with the group and contribution to its overall success rate. For instance, if your PC is the only one in the group who has the ability to heal wounds suffered by other characters, this puts your character in a very strong position. He will be seen as a valuable member of the group and will be appreciated, as long as he uses his healing power fairly and generously, without showing favoritism or requiring unreasonable compensation from those who benefit from his services.

3. Do you really have the proper mind-set to play the particular game persona at this time? While it isn't possible to perform at peak level at all times, an uninteresting or a distasteful PC is sure to lower your performance drastically over a long period of time. This might be acceptable in a casual episode in which experimentation and aberration are of no import, but it is quite destructive in an ongoing campaign. You will not gain enjoyment, the others in the group will have theirs hindered because of your imprudent choice, and the whole level of the campaign could suffer. Until you are a master-an individual capable of accepting any challenge and dealing with it willingly to the extent of its limits-it is always best to let your enthusiasm direct your selection when in doubt.

Whatever path you select for your PC to follow, you must then begin thinking like that persona. Whether the game is patterned after a real or an imaginary activity, you need to make your mind-set such that you can role-play your character realistically within the game milieu. If you are to be an interstellar explorer, don't think in terms of becoming rich through trade and commerce. Piety becomes a cleric, caution and alertness a spy or a thief. You should be bold and aggressive as a knight, while as a

worker of magic, you will tend toward reclusiveness and mystery. The rules and spirit of the game tell you what you can and cannot do in general and somewhat concrete terms, but it is very much up to the individual to take on the role of the PC and play it well.

In addition to delineating a field of endeavor for a PC, some game systems allow for selection of a race, or species, other than human for the PC. This can be a so-called demi-human, such as a dwarf or an elf, in a fantasy setting; or it can be some alien creature type in a science fiction milieu. Whatever the selection of races or species presented, the choice facing the player is quite similar to that of profession or skill grouping. There will be advantages and drawbacks to each potential selection. The rules must be understood, and all the decisions that pertain to profession or skill area should be made prior to selecting a PC's race. If you simply *must* play a magic-user in the AD&D game campaign being developed, then your character cannot also be a dwarf, because the rules of the game prohibit dwarves from being magic-users, and vice versa. The inclusion of choices for race or species in RPGs is simply another method of allowing participants to explore the possibilities and solve the problems of the system. It is worth noting that the play of a nonhuman (dwarf, elf, alien, etc.) is more difficult than that of a human when considerations of good role-playing are borne in mind- because, obviously, none of us is actually a nonhuman in real life and thus we do not have any frame of reference to use as a foundation when we try to role-play such a character.

Player-character gender is not usually an important consideration. Whether the character is male or female (or other, if extraterrestrial), the sex of a PC is only meaningful to the degree to which stress is placed upon gender in the particular campaign milieu. Granted, some RPG rules have small differentiations for sex, but these are quickly grasped by an astute participant and are usually merely

minor details. The only real considerations that must be dealt with are those of group dynamics and the ability of the player to role-play the gender selected properly.

4. Last, we come to the moral and ethical bent of the PC, often referred to as *alignment*. Does the RPG deal with the concepts of good and evil? Order and chaos? The answer will affect the choice of character activity expressed by its field of endeavor. The AD&D game system, for example, features a fairly extensive treatment of moral and ethical approaches to PCs and other beings in the system. It does so to promote distinctions among groups, to assist the Dungeon Master (this game's term for a GM) in developing the campaign milieu, and to remind participants how to role-play. Because a game is not reality, participants tend to allow situations to cause great swings in alignment that are not typical of real persons, who have developed their perspectives and had them ingrained during years of real-life experience. Other than the reasons just described and the need to make stark the villains and highlight the heroes, there is little or no need to deal with such concepts within the game framework.

The play group-game master and players will exert the ultimate influence with respect to alignment or unacceptable behavior of PCs. If the game involves players portraying a group of military personnel seeking survival in a hostile environment, aggression and active self-defense are necessary attributes. Similarly, action-adventure is the stress most frequently given to role games. With such considerations properly placed at the foundation of the activity, play within the game environment is simply based on the situation presented. It is neither wrong nor condemnable to act the part of a character who by the social and cultural standards of our society is bad, evil, or wrong. When all is said and done, games are not reality or actual life. It makes as much sense to vilify an actor for playing the role of a villain as it does to say that a participant in a game who has a PC whose moral standards

cannot be called good is engaging in some form of wrongdoing. ***Master role-playing gamers easily separate the difference between play and reality. In fact, even novices can do so without much difficulty.***

Alignment is an aid to the participants in order to define roles and to enable the players to better play their characters. Its function is clear when the decision of PC selection needs to be made. Mind-set, GM preference, and group predominance will modify this choice to some extent. Otherwise there is no particular meaning with respect to this aspect of the RPG system.

Knowing the whole of the system, and studying carefully that portion of the rules that deals with the creation and advancement of player characters, gives the participant a great advantage when choosing and developing a PC. Since the game persona is created to serve in a lengthy series of play sessions (the campaign), care must be used in selection of profession or skills, race or species, gender, and alignment of the new PC. Above all, the player must be enthusiastic about long-term participation in the game with the chosen PC.

Achieving mastery as a player is a step-by-step process in more ways than one. First, a certain PC type must be selected and played as faithfully as possible within the framework of the milieu, meeting or sidestepping each of the game's challenges as they present themselves, according to the characteristics of the PC and the inclination of the player. Then the aspiring master will branch out, trying his hand at role-playing a different kind of PC to discover firsthand how the opportunities and challenges in the game differ for that character. As the would-be master portrays more and more different character types over the course of time and involves himself in different campaigns as well, he develops an overview of how the game system accommodates and restricts each PC type. Study and analysis of the system are part and parcel of play, and the more varied the roles undertaken by a participant, the better equipped he or she becomes to fully comprehend the game system and utilize all it offers to enhance enjoyment of play.

Such enjoyment extends not only to the individual player but to the group as a whole.

## STEPS TO ROLE-PLAYING MASTERY

Here is a brief review of the steps that must be taken on the path to becoming a master player. Although they need not be taken expressly in the order given, some of these steps obviously precede others; for instance, knowing the rules of the game necessarily comes before role-playing your character fully and correctly.

1. ***Study the rules of your chosen role-playing game.*** Being intimately familiar with the rules structure is essential to understanding what you are doing, and understanding is the foundation of mastery.
2. ***Learn the goal(s) of the game.*** In other words, understand what the role of the PCs is in the game environment—the responsibilities and obligations of the player characters around whom the game world revolves. This is **not** the same as knowing what your individual role as a PC is; that is covered in step 9.
3. ***Discover the spirit of the game, and make it your credo in play.*** The concept of “spirit” is defined in the foregoing text. Although the goal of a game may be contained within its spirit, the spirit of the game usually goes deeper. Perceive it, understand it, and have your PC live by it when you engage in play.
4. ***Know the genre in which the game is set, and study it often.*** If your PC is to act as though the game world is his or her native environment, then you as a player must feel comfortable and at home in the genre of the game. You cannot have a meaningful experience in a fantasy RPG without being familiar with the genre of fantasy as described in myth, legend, and literature. Likewise, background knowledge in science fiction, modern-day espionage, or the exploits of comic book heroes is vital if your game is set in one of those genres.

5. **Remember that the real you and your game persona are different.** An obvious fact, restated here for emphasis. The you of the game milieu is entirely different from the YOU of the world you actually live in, even if your PC happens to possess many of the traits present in your own personality and behavior patterns. And, just as obviously, the same goes for all the other players and PCs in the group.
6. Know **your** team's PCs and **those who play them**. The only way to get along in a group is to be familiar with the other members of the group. Take the time to learn about the other PCs and the players who control them, so that you can understand and appreciate their intentions and methods and, in so doing, become a more useful and integral part of the group yourself.
7. **Know the campaign in which you play.** This is different from knowing the genre, because the game campaign devised by the GM is a unique entity unto itself. Accept and assimilate all the information given to you by the GM about the campaign world, and always strive to learn more. Knowledge is power, and more important, knowledge leads to success.
8. **Understand the role of the game master and assist its fulfillment.** More about this will be given in the text to come. For now, suffice it to say these two things: The GM is the sole arbiter of all that goes on in the campaign world, but all-powerful in this case does not mean all-knowing; no game master can succeed without the willing assistance of all the players.
9. **Role-play your character fully and correctly.** Make sure that your actions, decisions, and behavior as a player are faithful to the role of the PC you are representing. When you have a trait or a tendency your PC does not possess, do your best to keep that aspect of your personal makeup from surfacing during play.
10. **Always seek to contribute the most to the team's success.** From the players' and the PCs' standpoint, any role-



playing game is a group endeavor. Individual success is secondary to the success of the group, for only through group achievements can the quality of a campaign be measured.

11. ***Put forth your personal best during play.*** The advice given in step 10 does not mean that you should ever compromise in your efforts to succeed as a player. Your PC may have to subjugate his or her individual desires from time to time to ensure the general welfare of the group, but that is as it should be, and this does not mean that you should ever allow your enthusiasm and drive as a player to lessen.
12. ***Play as frequently as possible.*** Just as in step 5, this could almost go without saying. The hobby of role-playing games is no different from any other endeavor in that exposure to the activity must be frequent and ongoing in order for the participant to achieve a high level of skill. If your life-style or life circumstances do not permit you to play often, or if you simply don't have the desire to spend a great share of your leisure time involved in RPGs, then you cannot hope to achieve mastery unless the prohibitive factor(s) can be removed. You can, of course, still enjoy playing.
13. ***Play various characters as often as possible in as many different circumstances as possible.*** It is not enough to play as frequently as possible if each of your play sessions is essentially the same as all the others. To gain mastery as a player, you must experience firsthand what it's like to take the roles of as many different character types as your game provides for. You do not play these characters simultaneously but consecutively. If you start a new character after one is killed or retired, make a point of selecting a PC type you have not yet played or one with which you have relatively little experience. If action in the campaign occasionally shifts from one place to another in the GM's world, you may have an opportunity to change the character you play from one

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game session to another. However you do it, expose yourself to as much variety in the choice and operation of PCs as you possibly can.

14. **Play outside your group's campaign frequently.** In your quest for variety, don't overlook the opportunity for education and enjoyment that is offered by playing in more than one campaign. If you know more than one GIM and are able to divide your playing time so as to be an active member of each campaign, there is no substitute for the breadth of knowledge and experience that this will give you.
15. **Play in** tournaments. Gaming clubs exist and game conventions are held in most areas of the United States and in many locations in other countries, especially Canada and Great Britain. To achieve mastery as a player, you must eventually (if not immediately) become involved in RPG tournaments that are staged by clubs and convention organizers. These are special play sessions in which various groups of players take part in the same game adventure at different times (similar to the way a duplicate bridge tournament is run). By comparing your performance to that of other players whose PCs were faced with the same problems and challenges, you can get a sense of your strengths and weaknesses in a way that is not available to you as long as your experience remains restricted to one or a few local campaigns.
16. Make **yourself aware of the** gaming **community and contribute to it.** As alluded to in the opening chapter of this book and in step 15, there's a great world of RPG activity going on around you. In addition to running clubs and conventions, or at least participating in them, aspiring masters can benefit from and even contribute to a number of amateur and professional magazines that cover RPG activity and the community in which it takes place. To keep abreast of what other gamers are thinking and doing, you should be a regular reader of at least one such periodical. To show evidence of your own expertise,

you could prepare and submit article manuscripts to these magazines. If you are skilled enough and fortunate enough to have your writings accepted and published, then you will have accomplished something that only a few others among the millions of RPG enthusiasts can claim. Having your work published is not in itself an indication of mastery, but the converse does apply: Most of *those who achieve mastery are eager and willing to share their ideas and their knowledge with others who seek that same goal, and in so doing, they maintain and increase their own high level of skill.*

17. ***Continue to learn and grow even after you achieve mastery.*** Mastery is like any other acquired skill. If you do not continually use and exercise it, the skill will atrophy. But if you remain actively involved in the hobby at the highest level you can attain, you will be pleasantly surprised to find that your level of expertise keeps rising all the time. The sky is not the limit to mastery, for-as any science fiction enthusiast can tell you- there are infinite worlds left to explore once the sky is left behind.



# Chapter 3



## THE MASTER GM

**M**any if not all of the persons who purchase this book are both game masters and players in one or more campaigns. Although this book began by addressing the subject of mastery as if there were a sharp division between game masters and players, and the first material given on the general subject of mastery (in Chapter 2) was aimed at the player instead of the GM, there is a good reason for that approach. It is easier to express most of the principles of good play and mastery of a game through references to the act of playing than it is to begin by detailing what the game master must be and do in order to attain what is defined herein as mastery. It is a much greater task to be a good game master than it is to be a good player, and the latter is included in the former. After having read this far, you know the requirements for the player striving toward mastery. What follows here is a description of what the game master must know and do in pursuit of mastery. As you will see, some of this advice is expressed in terms of what a good GM is not, for often it is by accentuating the negative that we can more precisely define the positive.

## THE CREATOR, ORGANIZER, AND ARBITER OF ALL

First, a motivated individual-the GM-to-be-examines the choices of game products available. Based on his interest and the interests of others he hopes to include in the activity, he selects a game, studies it, prepares the materials necessary for ongoing participation by a group of player participants, and then begins recruiting others to associate themselves with the game as presented by him: his campaign. With this first bit of work completed, the would-be GM must approach the next steps with the proper attitude. How he perceives his role in the scheme of things and how he presents himself to his potential players are critical.

Creation of the campaign world is the GM's first significant expenditure of independent creative effort, after he has fully acquainted himself with the rules of the game and the possibilities that those rules allow for. Before one bit of world-designing work is done, however, the GM must have a clear sense of his proper role in the playing group, and that is why the following bit of guidance precedes any discussion of campaign creation.

Players and GMs alike, take heed: Despite misguided perceptions to the contrary, ***the game master is not the enemy of the player characters!*** At least, he shouldn't be. Those unenlightened or unscrupulous would-be GMs who take this stance of hostility toward PCs (or worse yet, toward players) won't be around long anyway, for their players will desert them in short order. Who then opposes the players' game personas? The GM does indeed have the duty of effecting opposition and posing problems-but not on a person-versus-person or person-versus-character basis. He does this by playing the parts of the various beings who are adversarial to the PCs engaged in the challenge posed by the session-on a character-versus-character basis, to distinguish it from the other forms of interaction just named. In addition to being the architect of the world in which the PCs' adventures take place, the game master is also the representative of all the opposing creatures, forces, and phenomena that strive to keep the PCs from achieving

their desired ends. This opposition must be personified in such a way as to present the maximum challenge for PCs and their players while not being so overwhelmingly powerful that any PC who dares to resist or combat the opposition is smeared flat when he makes his first move. This approach is valid and important even in the first stages of campaign creation; for instance, a GM who designs a world where the environment itself is fraught with naturally existing perils is asking for trouble. The point is to challenge the PCs, not kill them outright.

The game tells what the nature of challenges within its scope will be, but there is usually no direct information as to the specific objective of each play session. The GM who develops the campaign milieu will devise these objectives singularly or in conjunction with material supplied for this purpose by the publisher of the rules system. What sorts of challenges are appropriate? How stiff should the opposition be? Generally, these are questions the GM will answer by examining the game materials, assessing the prowess of the PCs and their players, and then selecting and combining elements of the game rules and the milieu so that the strength of the opposition is tailored to the capabilities of those who will contest against it.

Through the examples and information set forth in your game of choice, the challenges in the game should be evident. In narrowly defined genres such as espionage, mystery/crime detection, and historically based systems, the possibilities will be easily determined. In those games in which imagination is free to roam-fantasy, horror, science fiction-then only the most general information about challenges can be given, although the material for a specific game might infer more. The division is clear in either case. In some systems, the major problems for PCs to overcome will be of a cerebral nature, with conflict of this sort paramount. In others, there will be more actual adversaries who must be combated through physical means.

Human opponents usually will fall within the range of possibilities open to player characters, although some exceptional and rare superhuman types might be allowed to the GM for use against skilled players with powerful PCs. Because RPG systems



deal with make-believe, all adversaries are simply sets of statistics plus descriptive data included to personify them for participants-especially for the GM, since it is he who must take the part of each such creature and role-play it. Unlike a player character, an opponent is typically not nurtured and considered over long periods of time. When one appears, it is skimmed over and then played at by the GM. The greater the number of opponents appearing, the more difficult it is for the game master to represent them properly, even if the foes appear sequentially rather than all at once. Imagine, if you will, the demands placed upon you as a player if you were expected to operate even a dozen PCs expertly during the course of a game session!

Initially the GM is the driving force that begins the campaign. His major creative effort is the development and upkeep of the game milieu through the campaign. Even on its simplest level, a small area in which limited game-related activity can take place, the task he has set about is monumental. In fact, if most GMs understood just what the creation of a complete campaign world entails, it is probable that the overwhelming nature of the whole would deter them from starting. Fortunately for all concerned, the magnitude of the campaign milieu and its attendant requirements are not conveyed (and perhaps cannot be, to the uninitiated). Work commences, a scenario for play is readied, and the next step-assembling a group of players-is taken.

Many times the preparations for assembling a group of players and having them engage in a play session have been made parallel to the creation of the first portion of the campaign world. Then the first session begins. Players are introduced to the game and its concepts. Some goal, objective, or end is conveyed. The players busy themselves creating their characters, and then the first episode of actual play in the campaign finally gets under way. While players are learning about the game, the GM's expression of the game through his campaign expression, and the dynamics of their group, the GM is also gaining knowledge. He learns what he knows and doesn't know with respect to the game system. He begins to find places where the system is silent or vague on some point that warrants attention. He also discovers how little of the

campaign milieu he has actually created with his intensive efforts to date.

Because the game seeks to reflect actual life, the campaign world has a scope equal to that of the universe, that is, most probably infinite. Fortunately, the GM needs only to create and develop details according to the rate the player group progresses and demands such details. Just as fortunately, the game master has the game itself to work with, accessory products to aid him in filling out the milieu, and the cooperative assistance of other GMs and players, including his own. The task of creating the game world is tremendous nonetheless. Let's follow an example to see just how demanding the exercise is.

The genre of the game is action-adventure in the early part of the twentieth century-let's assume from 1900 through about 1935 or so. Our GM decides that the campaign setting will begin in San Francisco. The quest problem will be to discover the cause of a series of murders and mysterious disappearances in that city. Knowing that player participants will be allied with the forces of law, the GM now has three immediate tasks: First, he must develop a reasonable set of circumstances in which crimes have been committed. Second, he must develop the structure and motives of the group responsible for these crimes, detail all the minions of the group who will oppose the player group's game personas, and then determine what clues and leads this sinister combination of non-player characters (NPCs) would inadvertently or deliberately leave behind. Third, the GM must develop the allied law enforcement and government officials and other concerned individuals who will aid (or impede) the progress of the PCs. With this group must be intermixed a mass of neutral persons, places, and things-the background within which the whole quest will operate.

What does all this mean in concrete terms? For starters, the GM must have a reasonably detailed and accurate map of the whole San Francisco Bay area circa 1920 (to pick a date at random). Another map showing all streets in the city proper is also needed. Drawings and photographs of the place are necessary for play. How else will the whole campaign take on an aura of reality?

From these actualities, some area for the major activity must be decided upon. Thereafter, a small-scale fictitious map can be drawn. This must show special buildings, who resides there or what business activity is transacted therein, secret places, hidden exits, and who knows what else as demanded by the scenario devised. Is this enough to begin play with? Oh, no-we're just getting warmed up!

For the sake of this little exposition, let's assume that the murders and one of the disappearances took place in Chinatown-an exotic and mysterious place sure to start the heart of the intrepid romantic beating at a faster pace. There will be suspicions of opium being somehow involved, and the complication of a tong war (conflict between opposing Chinese gangs or secret societies) taking place so that one's life is truly at risk when a stranger-read PC-enters the area. Then there will be a revelation. Witnesses to the most recent crime, reliable ones at that, will state that they are sure the perpetrators were Caucasian, not Oriental. The PCs will have to investigate, and only by carefully analyzing the information gained will they begin to suspect that the whole affair involves much more than a bit of murder and kidnapping. The plot thickens. The GM decides that a group of Chinese disguised as Caucasians killed a relative nonentity simply to throw possible investigation into the real motives of their past crimes off the track. The tong war is real but controlled, allowed to happen by the criminal mastermind behind the whole ghastly affair. The murders were of persons opposing the plots and machinations of the mastermind. The disappearances are of persons this criminal genius means to bend to his will for one reason or another-knowledge, influence, or employment in a portion of his nefarious scheme to dominate the world. What a cast of characters! What action!

Into this boiling cauldron are tossed the unsuspecting player participants, eagerly and enthusiastically moving their PCs about in an effort to solve the mystery of the scenario. Little do they know that at best they can only foil completion of this particular scheme! If they perform to the maximum, they can come out with

their PCs still alive, gain some rewards, and have the beginning of an understanding about what they are facing—a worldwide conspiracy, the goal of which is for all non-Caucasians to rule the globe. This dark plot is under the direction of none other than the most fiendish and intelligent man ever to live, Fu Manchu! Of course, should the group succeed in checking this minor activity of his, the sinister doctor will still carry on other schemes, each and every one of which is darker and more threatening, and he will be aware of the newly come foes as well. Oh, oh!

Oh, oh is right. The GM has surely set a task for his players and for himself. Let's forget about peopling the activity area with villains and disinterested civilians who might know something. Let's even pass over the society of San Francisco, the subculture of Chinatown, and the details of everyday life in 1920. Let's move on to the big picture. Where is the headquarters of good old Fu? Does he have other strongholds? Where? Who are his lieutenants? His soldiers? What is the plan he has? We know the goal, but what about objectives and ends? Where will the trail lead from San Francisco? How will data on principal places of action be found! (Think of it—Tokyo, Hong Kong, London, Paris, Shanghai, Cairo, Istanbul, Calcutta, New York. . . and the list goes on.) Lost knowledge, lost civilizations, secret science, strange drugs, cults, and who knows what else must be fabricated or researched, or both. Oh yes, does anyone know the cost of train travel between Paris and Bucharest in 1920, What about the price of first-class passage on a steamer from San Francisco to Tokyo? And, while we're at it, how long does this journey take?

That sums up the background and details needed for setting up a campaign goal, setting forth objectives, defining ends, and quantifying everything through play scenarios of one sort or another. From this date, the GM will be able to role-play the characters encountered by the PCs (which are referred to as non-**player** characters, or NPCs), remembering that those of outstanding ability and those who will have continuing parts in the unfolding story will have to be extensively detailed to enable intelligent play. With this wealth of information in his mind or at his finger

tips, the GM then presents it, serves as the sensory organs of each and every PC, plays the parts of every creature encountered by the PCs, and keeps track of it all at the same time.

The game master is the creator, organizer, and arbiter of all. His most important functions during play, though, are more mundane. He is nature. He provides sensory data, and finally he fills in by playing the roles of living things the PCs interact with during the course of a session. With such an investment on an emotional as well as an intellectual level, the GM is prone to be something other than a disinterested party, although disinterested and impartial he must remain if it is at all possible. If the GM must succumb to a certain amount of emotional and preferential behavior-and it is virtually impossible not to do this-he should manifest these qualities not by desiring to see the PCs fail, so that the players become discouraged and (heaven forbid) cease play. Instead, he should be eager for the players to do so well with their PCs that they utilize every aspect, explore every bit of detail, and meet and overcome every obstacle that he has so painstakingly put into the scenario and the surrounding campaign.

The dedicated GM is not only an impartial judge of events, but at the same time he is an active force championing the cause of both the preservation of PCs not bent on self-destruction and the continued satisfaction of players who do not seek to see the campaign ruined. Conversely, he has no ethical or moral obligation to keep a PC alive and viable if that character's player insists on leaping into the jaws of adversity-and he owes it to himself and the others in the group to discipline or dismiss a player who has a selfish and treacherous attitude toward the campaign.

To reiterate, the game master is not an enemy; neither is he by nature adversarial. He desires successful play by participants when their play is kept within specified limits and as long as it promotes the ongoing nature of the campaign. Being human, no GM can desire otherwise, considering the effort expended to bring the campaign into play and keep it there.

If players were more aware of the multiple concerns of the GM, they would do more to assist him in times of need. Although many players also participate in campaigns of their own as game mas-

ters, they often do not allow this knowledge to feed them when they are acting in the other role. Perhaps this is because they believe their own attitudes are unique.

As in real life, though, experiences are more universal than many realize. This is true of game mastering and playing alike. To be a truly masterful GM, the individual must have experienced extensive participation in one or more RPGs as a player. Otherwise how can the needs and wants of that group be understood by the GM? In keeping with this attitude, there are times when the GM will bend or break the rules of the game system in order to allow his players to maintain their characters. Just as he sometimes metes out punishment for infractions, the GM at other times intervenes benevolently, spreading his aegis over the PCs to save them from probabilities gone awry. To put it bluntly, when play is at a low ebb, or it is quite likely that the players' characters are about to suffer undue loss or extinction, the GM cheats and decrees otherwise. Opponents miss their blows, PCs manage to strike their foes, and various sorts of miracles occur. This is wrong only when it is done too liberally or when it is unwarranted. If the PC party is in danger of extermination through no direct fault of its own and because a string of unlikely occurrences have all somehow come to pass, then this is the time for the GM to step in and set things back on the right track, or at least keep them from getting any worse.

### INCREASING THE EXCITEMENT OF PLAY

As the hours of playing time in a campaign accumulate, the skill of the players increases and the burden of devising different and more demanding problems comes before the game master. It is a simple enough matter for the GM to arrange for the PCs to encounter new, more powerful foes, but it is often more desirable (although often more difficult) to introduce instead complexities in the task of overcoming the old ones. Problems that have nothing to do with fighting or overcoming enemy creatures also need to be considered and placed into the campaign. These may take the form of labyrinths and mazes to be negotiated, mysteries to be

solved, information or objects to be gathered, riddles to be interpreted, and who knows what else.

All this creative energy is required because your efforts stimulated the players, now becoming a team, into action. Now they expect-nay, demand!-more and better excitement. You must provide them with quests and problems that stretch them even further. Your imagination and creativity are taxed to the fullest in order to meet the players' demands for challenges that will make them utilize their ingenuity and imagination.

This cycle is ongoing for a considerable period of time. During the course of the spirals of play, when the players begin at a point beneath the ability of the GM and gradually meet and surpass the game master's apparent level, only to be outfoxed again by the wily GM, more time and effort are called for. GMs can be thankful that there are published materials to assist them in the never-ending search for new ideas, and the game group itself is a marvelous source of inspiration to the game master.

You respond to the players' needs by revising and expanding the campaign milieu. First they may demand more intense and detailed combat frequently. Then they might find more esoteric approaches to unusual problems more interesting. You address these preferences as soon as you become aware of the trend. Here is where your first real test of game-mastering ability confronts you. The wishes of the play group might well be contrary to the goal of the game, and you must find a way to satisfy the players while not compromising that goal. The desires of the players might violate the spirit of the game system. Then again, one or two vocal and strong-willed participants might suggest a course that the others are uncertain of or not actually interested in.

In all such cases, the superior game master protects the campaign first and foremost. Responding to the needs of the play group does not mean you must cater to destructive desires or condescend to fulfilling whims. But at the same time, you must make every effort to tailor the campaign so that it accommodates the players' interests as much as possible, without allowing them actually to determine its intent or direction. Allowing players to bring in fresh ideas and creativity is a manifestation of natural

growth within the campaign. The cycles spoken of earlier are part of group dynamics, and the synergism of the player group assists in enabling the GM to develop material with which to continually confound and amuse the players. Their play and expressed comments are of great importance. It is, in fact, the shenanigans of the PCs that inspire some of the most determined efforts of the GM to prevent them from getting away with any future hijinks of that sort. The difficulty arises when players try to revise the game system, violate the spirit, or make the campaign into a play-ground-as opposed to a testing ground-for their game personas. The following two paragraphs describe alterations that, in my estimation, would cause much more harm than good if they were introduced into an AD&D game campaign. They are provided here as examples of what not to try in the name of campaign betterment.

Players have tried to convince me to allow the use of gunpowder in my AD&D game campaign. From one standpoint, the thought is tempting. Just imagine kobolds, the most inconsequential of humanoid monsters, armed with Uzi submachine guns-now there's a monster that would strike terror in the heart of even the most powerful PC! Likewise, regenerating trolls plying bayonetted rifles might be a pure joy to the harassed Dungeon Master looking for a way to put self-important PCs in their place. But the game is medieval fantasy, and the spirit is magic, not technology. Despite my (unexpected by the players) temptation to allow its use just to show them, the idea had to be rejected. The time spent in dealing with it and then having them reject it would be wasted.

In both the D&D and AD&D games, the spell-using power of PCs is controlled through the use of a system that requires study and memorization of magic spells before they can be cast. Then, once a spell is used, the ability to cast it is erased from the character's mind until that character again takes time to study and memorize the particular spell. Well, some years back, there arose a line of thinking that asserted that magic in a fantasy game was best expressed in terms of spell points-characters should be able to cast a certain spell often and repeatedly, with each usage simply costing the caster a specified number of "points" from his magical



ability. The D&D and AD&D games were criticized harshly by advocates of this approach for being behind the times. The fad lasted for a time, with spell-casters spewing forth streams of sorcerous stuff as if they were magical Gatling guns. Everyone wanted to be a magic-user of that sort-but what could stand before such a character? How much fun is a game in which any challenge or problem can be overcome by calling up yet another spell from a seemingly limitless storehouse of energy? Good-bye, spell-point magic system. This is not a condemnation of the idea of using a point system, but the point system as advocated did not fit the D&D or AD&D game system spells, rules, assumptions, or spirit. The idea is workable still, but needs its own body of surrounding material to operate effectively.

The role of the game master requires that a constant vigil be kept to see that the game campaign vehicle is maintained for use by the group for as long a time as they so desire. Destruction of the campaign through error, whether advertent or inadvertent, illustrates a total lack of any ability. It violates the first tenet of being a game master-knowing, understanding, and respecting the game system and spirit. The foregoing sentence must be taken for what it is worth. The game-any RPG-exists to provide entertainment for those who find such a pursuit enjoyable. The campaign expression of the game system exists because the creator, its game master, and, later, its players wish it to. Thus the campaign serves the singular play group, not the game system or other play groups outside the campaign.

## **THE TENETS OF GM MASTERY**

The attitude of the master GM is always positive. When he looks at a situation laden with problems, he sees opportunities instead-for every problem, no matter how severe, implies the existence of an opportunity in the form of a solution. He knows the game, his campaign, and the individuals and their PCs who form the group. He works hard to serve the group and is served in turn by each participant. The selflessness of the GM's role is made satisfying by the accolades, spoken and unuttered, of those who

enjoy his campaign. There is a special bond between GM and players, just as there is one between GMs who conduct campaigns based on the same genre. When the GM moves from being master of his own campaign to being a masterful GM, he extends himself to encompass all aspects of the gaming community. He might never attain the status of a master player with respect to tournament play, but in all other respects, the master GM is the epitome of both mastery in play and game mastering.

To conclude this chapter, just as the previous one was brought to a close, following are enumerated the tenets that a game master must embrace in order to achieve mastery of his craft.

1. ***The game exists to provide entertainment on an ongoing basis.*** The key words here are “entertainment” and “ongoing.” The RPG activity must be entertaining (exciting, challenging, and fun at the same time), or else no one in the group will desire to continue participating. And following from that last thought, any role-playing game must be an ongoing, continuing activity in order for its full potential as a means of entertainment to be realized. Player characters are not created so that they can live through one or two brief episodes, and a campaign world is not designed for the sake of a few isolated hours of activity. If the effort that goes into playing is not to be wasted, the play must extend over a long period of time so that the effort invested can realize a return.
2. ***The individual campaign is an interpretative extension of the game it is based on, aimed at activity by a small group.*** The rules of a game describe a genre or a general situation in which game activity takes place. It is up to the game master to apply the principles and generalities given in the rules by creating a unique campaign environment in which those generalities are brought to life according to his sense of what sort of atmosphere will make for exciting and entertaining play. When he is creating his campaign, the GM must keep in mind that the realities of the world must be described in terms that can be appreciated and

acted upon by a small group of player characters. If the world or some part of it is in peril and must be saved, the danger must not be something that can only be successfully combated by an army, because the players most likely do not (and should not) have an army at their disposal.

3. ***The creative interpretation of a campaign must remain within the scope and spirit of the game.*** This is a similar point to tenet #2, but different enough and important enough to warrant a separate place on the list. It has to do not so much with the campaign setting but with the nature of the challenges placed within that setting that must be met (and, ideally, overcome) by the PCs. For example, in an AD&D game campaign, the player characters cannot legitimately be challenged by invaders from outer space, because that sort of challenge lies outside the scope of the game system. The challenge cannot be something that requires the PCs to use the same methods used by the evil opposition in order to combat that evil (to be even “badder” than the “bad guys”), because that violates the spirit of the game.
4. ***The campaign is constantly undergoing modification through game master and player interaction.*** When the principal characters in a story (the campaign) are free-willed and have a multitude of choices regarding how to proceed, it is counterproductive-and, in fact, impossible — to preordain just how the events in the campaign will unfold. Any successful campaign must be flexible, and its creator must be open to changes-not only the changes that he perceives are necessary, but those that are directly or indirectly suggested by the preferences and actions of the players and the PCs. The result of ongoing modification is a campaign that at any point reflects and fulfills the desires and inclinations of the players as well as the GM.
5. ***The role of game master is that of an active neutral with duty first to the campaign, then the group, and then the game.*** First and foremost, the campaign must not only

persevere but thrive. If it does not, then the group will founder and dissolve. Second-and a close second it is indeed-comes the interest of the group, specifically the player group. The members must be allowed and even encouraged to act in any way they see fit, as long as such action does not contravene the direction or the objective of the campaign. Third, but by no means unimportant, is the game system itself. The scope and the spirit of the game are inviolate and will remain so as long as the campaign remains dedicated to those ideals (as it always should). But the rules structure of the game is not and should not be immune to alteration. If the rules stress, for instance, combat over problem-solving, but the campaign and the group happen to lean in the other direction, then the GM is obliged to add to and delete from the rules structure selectively to reflect the aspects that the group desires the rules to focus on. In specific cases in which the PCs are in jeopardy because the rules of the game have worked against them through a rare succession of unlikely and adverse occurrences, the GM is within his rights to override the provisions of the rules for the sake of guaranteeing (for the moment, at least) the continued survival and viability of the player characters. In all cases, the GM must do his best to remain disinterested while retaining the power of absolute arbiter. If he allows his personality and emotions to creep into his methods of administering the campaign, he must do so with the intention of giving the PCs their best chance of success-as long as the players willingly and enthusiastically confront all the challenges that have been placed before their characters.

6. ***The game master serves best when he enables players to participate actively to their fullest.*** Following this maxim entails designing scenarios that will test PCs without overwhelming them; that will require the involvement of every PC in the participating group; and that will implicitly encourage each player to play his PC's role "in character" instead of being tempted or compelled to deviate from

that role in the interest of gaining some short-term benefit. Everyone in the group, including the GM, gets the most enjoyment out of a role-playing game when all participants share as equally as possible in the activity and when they all remain faithful to their chosen or designated roles in doing so.

7. ***Total mastery of a game system is desirable*** for game master ***and players alike***. Self-evident on the surface, but a point worth elaborating upon nonetheless. A GM who has achieved mastery is in the best possible position to give the players in his group an exciting and enriching experience, by all the means and for all the reasons described elsewhere in this book. And the game master, who works so hard and long to provide players and PCs with the best he can give them, deserves the same consideration and the same benefits from the players with whom he interacts. A playing group composed entirely of master players plus a master GM has reached the pinnacle of RPG achievement. Once they have reached that peak, the members of that group should have no difficulty-and not incidentally, more than a little fun-in staying there.

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# Chapter 4



## THE GROUP: MORE THAN ITS PARTS

**G**roup operation and cooperation are at the nucleus of any RPG activity. This fact should be obvious from the rules of the game, even if it is not explicitly stated within those rules. Despite this, many long-time participants in a single RPG system do not truly understand or appreciate the interrelationships of the varying approaches to the problems posed by the game system or to the dynamics of a group that is balanced and works well as a team. At the other extreme are novices who instantly grasp these facts and attempt to put their knowledge into play. If the two opposites happen to comprise the same group, or a part thereof, sparks will surely fly. Mere time and experience at play do not make expertise. A veteran soldier is not necessarily either a good tactician or a master of strategy. Because role-playing games are group-oriented, and ongoing play and success require cooperation, the other player participants must be regarded as friends, or at worst allies, until one or another demonstrates otherwise.

The general subject of “the group” can be divided into three subtopics: the group composed of all participants including the game master, referred to here as the playing **group**; the group composed only of players, or the player **group**; and the characters being portrayed by those players, or the **PC** group. This chapter deals primarily with the first and second types of groups; that is, the actual people who are interacting with each other as they play the game. Some advice on operation of and cooperation within the PC group was given in Chapter 2, because the subject directly bears on any attempt to become a master player. Other observations on this third type of group are given in this chapter, where appropriate. As with the discussion of the game master in the preceding chapter, much of the following advice about group dynamics is expressed in negative terms or in the form of danger signs to watch for. When everyone in the playing group has progressed to the point that none of these danger signs is evident, then you can be sure that all the participants have taken a giant step along the path to mastery.

## GROUP INTERACTION

To understand the nature of the playing group, let us first consider the basic types of gatherings that are typical of RPG participants.

**The regular veteran playing** group is most desirable. If you are seriously interested in the play and mastery of role-playing games, it is absolutely necessary to engage in frequent and regular exercise of role-playing with a skilled GM and players who are as enthusiastic as you are. A description of this group would include individuals with the following characteristics: The game master is dedicated to providing fresh and challenging problems in an imaginative setting to a group of players who appreciate this effort. The players are uniformly interested in the genre, have a sound grasp of the game rules, understand roles and role-playing, and function as a cooperative entity in order to succeed both as a team and as individual PCs. Furthermore, the players also are likely to themselves be or have been game masters. Each participant may have several characters that will be played as individual

PCs or as player character associates (henchmen, assistants, or whatever) at different times. The players are peers, but not necessarily age-group peers. That is, they have common interests or experience at playing the RPG. If they are also age-group peers, then the group will have an even stronger bond and a very high level of dynamism.

The major drawback to belonging to such a playing group is that the group will tend to develop its own dynamism to such an extent that it will develop rules variants and play methods that tend to isolate it from other groups. These groups are also in danger of becoming insular. To counteract these trends, the members must actively seek contact with both similar and diverse groups, add new individuals to its body (if only on an occasional but regular basis), and maintain contact with the whole of the RPG community.

**The fragmented veteran playing group** is basically the same group just described. The difference is that the GM and players are unable to meet frequently on a regular basis. The game master might hold irregular meetings with only a few or even none of the regulars. The regular players might be found playing in other, less desirable groups because of their inability to play with the fragmented veteran group. The players might well all serve as GMs regularly, by force of circumstances, even though they are more proficient as players and enjoy that form of participation more.

The participants of such a group will certainly bring much to those outside it if they continue to be active. The problem is that members of fragmented playing groups tend to fall out of regular gaming unless each is able to find or establish a regular play group. Failing this, the group will lose its members, with only one or two actively playing or game mastering. The balance of the people will join them on rare occasions, but as an entity, the group has disappeared.

**The enthusiast-driven playing group** contains at least two really enthused RPG players. One or perhaps two of them will serve as game masters. These enthusiasts attract casual participants, who make up the remainder of the group. The regular GM will be pleased to have the one or two dedicated players and will show



this. The balance of the participants will tend to drop away and may or may not be replaced by other “casuals.” What happens to such groups is that the enthusiasts are willing and/or able to play more frequently than the casual members. The GM caters to this desire, for it matches his own needs. The one or two dedicated players quickly outpace the other players, their knowledge and expertise become greater, and their PCs become stronger than those of the remaining players. Casual participants feel excluded and lose interest. If it is left alone, this group will soon become very small and insular, or else the core (the GM and the one or two enthusiasts) will split and join larger active groups.

This sort of group can be saved, and it often is if the GM understands the dynamics at work. Rather than allowing the casual players to feel excluded, the game master will encourage them to attend, will make special arrangements so they can play in sessions that do not include the enthusiasts, and will offer assistance, instruction, and example. When the enthusiasts are part of the group, the GM restrains them from dominating play. Contributions by casual players are given as much approbation as those made by the enthusiasts. In short, the GM (and possibly the enthusiasts as well) recognize that it is desirable to educate the casual players. From such a group, a regular veteran one might be built.

Peer-group participants tend to be school-age. One or more of their number acquires a role-playing game, and the others become players to continue social activity with their friends. This sort of group closely resembles the enthusiast-driven one detailed earlier, and it might well become such a group, with peers being replaced by fans of RPGs. On the other hand, the group is as likely—perhaps more so, in fact—to terminate when the GM loses interest and moves on. Because peer groups are large in most cases, their dissolution tends to leave a number of enthusiasts stranded. These enthusiasts would enjoy play but are unwilling or unable to initiate it through their own activity. Of the remaining members of the peer group, some will eventually find or found other groups, while the others simply drift away to other hobby or sport activities.

**Club** gatherings are the last type of playing group that we will consider here. The members of such a group are either peers or former members of groups that have dissolved. Club groups are centered on a place, either the residence of one of the members (usually the GM) or a sales outlet for role-playing game products. Longevity of the former sort of club group is dependent on the GM. Without the place to meet and the services provided by that central member, the club disappears. The other sort of club, centered around a sales outlet, is subject to frequent changes in membership. The burden of providing the place to meet falls upon the owner or proprietor of the sales outlet (who might or might not be a member of the club group), which means that participants (particularly GMs) are relatively free to move in and out of the group as they please. As this happens, the dynamics of the group change, and the game activity tends to fluctuate.

Since all role-playing games require play group input and group creativity, the participants are vital to the game. This is because they actually create much of it, for each and every group must devise some of the material needed for ongoing play. Then as play sessions continue, the interaction of PCs and GM with the rules of the system builds further creation. The regular veteran groups experience this to a high degree, the other groups on a lesser basis.

Just as the play group develops the game, it builds its own mythos and a subculture within the game system. There are tales of triumph and tragedy, genius and low humor. Heroes emerge, treacherous acts and their perpetrators are vilified. Places gain legendary status, and certain characters do likewise. Game terminology and past adventures lend material for the group to develop its own patois. Friendships and camaraderie possibly not felt outside the group, or not shared beyond its confines, are experienced when the campaign sessions are in progress. Time before and after play is filled with discussion relating to the game.

The dynamics at work in such groups build toward a high degree of involvement with the game, its expert play, and an inadvertent elitism. Newcomers, or those who do not share enthusiasm for the hobby to the degree of the others, feel excluded. The enthusiasts usually react by becoming more removed from the

others, emphasizing their dedication and expertise. This is usually because they identify the difference between themselves and the less enthused as indifference or rejection on the part of the latter persons. Often it is simply ignorance, inability, or diverse interests that separates these members. Thus, gamers who are seeking mastery will analyze the group in which they play and act accordingly. To build mastery, regular play is needed. To avoid insularism (and its attendant incestuousness), play outside the regular group is desired. Furthermore, new participants and fresh ideas are most beneficial. What to do?

If you are a member of a regular veteran group, the matter is simple. Do everything possible to strengthen the viability of your association, and enjoy the benefits. Such people tend to develop into masters through their constant play and enthusiastic participation outside their own group. The major problem facing such groups is variance and isolation. These difficulties can be overcome rather easily if desire and information are available. There is nothing basically wrong with the development of special methods of game play by the group, but these differences should be identified as such and looked upon as superior only insofar as play within and with the particular group is concerned.

With respect to other sorts of groups, the would-be master GM must exert himself to make them into regular veteran groups. This is done by accommodating new or less skilled participants in order to encourage and train them. It is also helpful to seek new recruits and be willing to accept them as part of the group. This sharing will bring enjoyment to others and at the same time will help assure the continuity of play the dedicated RPG enthusiast desires. Personal sacrifice by the enthusiast, possibly in the form of stopping one's involvement as a player in order to serve as GM, and lowering the level of play to accommodate less well developed PCs in the campaign sessions, will be well rewarded in the future. All the foregoing is necessary to understand and work toward. Development of mastery subsumes a large and long-term investment of time and effort. Without a group, such investment is wasted. With a superior group, the investment is bound to bring returns quickly and in far greater degree.

The fortunate participant will have a group of associates as eager to explore and learn the game system as he is. Such an individual will be able to select a PC based solely upon his own desire (or whim) without difficulty, for the group can accommodate this. In fact, the other members will be doing much the same from time to time, testing new approaches of play through special scenarios, different PC mixtures, and other like activities. The marvelous thing about a pursuit of mastery is that it is not work to the true enthusiast. The exercise is enjoyable and entertaining. The members of a regular veteran play group engage in activities of an exploratory nature as simple extensions of fun, perhaps not consciously realizing that this is one of the most important parts of gaining expertise in the field. Better still are those “hard core” groups whose members are well apprised of all aspects of RPG activity, are active in them, and are seeking mastery as a group. However, at this time, associations as devoted and dedicated as this are too rare. Were it otherwise, a work such as this would hardly be necessary.

As a player, your analysis of your player group must direct your selection (and attendant play) of a PC. You desire to facilitate your learning and the learning of the other participants as well. New player groups need balance in the composition of the party that will engage in sessions. Those who can be counted on to appear regularly must have complementary PCs. You must assist the group in achieving this balance, through suggestions or through example by how you select and develop your own PC. While in a regular veteran group an irritating, disruptive, or parasitic character might actually enhance interest and develop expertise for all concerned, such a PC is most undesirable in other types of groups. Thus, in a group of novice AD&D game players, for instance, a party of two fighters, a magic-user, and a cleric would benefit more from the addition of another fighter or cleric than from a barbarian or an illusionist. The first-mentioned classes are among the basic professions offered by the game system, while the last two are subclasses, or specialty types. By its nature, a barbarian (a subclass of fighter) or an illusionist (a subclass of magic-user) would be more difficult for a novice player to cope with. If

such a character was included in the PC group, that character and its player would either tend to dominate the GM's attention or else would be quietly relegated to an inferior role, in favor of the basic character types that are more easily managed. Obviously, neither of these situations is conducive to balance in the player group or the PC group.

At the other extreme, when all the players have become expert regular veterans, a disparate and seemingly hopeless mixture of PCs—a barbarian, a magic-user, an illusionist, and a bard, for instance—would probably be a welcome challenge because it would stretch the participants' knowledge and abilities into new and greater areas.

Even from a purely selfish standpoint, there is ample reason to allow group needs to strongly influence your decision-making process in the choice of a PC. Each player will, at least, be interested in amusement. Some will be actively seeking enjoyment on an ongoing basis. To a greater or lesser degree, personal factors (self-worth) will be part of each player's goals and motivation. Approbation and success are desirable to everyone. If your PC brings more fun to the play session, assists in gaining approbation for all, and contributes to the success of the group, then you will be given rewards of both a personal and a game-related nature. Thus you will enjoy yourself more and your PC will be made more viable for ongoing play. Several examples will be helpful.

A character with powers or skills unique to the group will always become a focal point for approbation if these unique factors are applied beneficially to the group activity. For instance, recall the example in Chapter 2 of the character with the ability to heal wounds, and what was said about the proper way to use that character's skill. If he only heals some characters and excludes others, that character and that player will not be popular with every other member of the group, regardless of the group's general need for a character of that sort. Sharing of knowledge for the benefit of the other players will be recognized—especially if the individual so doing politely points this out.

If you are one of the more experienced and accomplished members of the group, the sacrifice of some of your PC's cherished

possessions, or even of the character itself, is sometimes in order to preserve another individual's standing or the viability of the group. A newcomer or a casual player cannot deal with this sort of loss the same way an expert or master player is able to. This might mean your loss of a PC on which you have expended considerable time and resources. Yet failure to do this might result in group dissolution and the attendant loss of all play opportunity.

Just as contributing to the player group tends to assure its continued existence, assisting other players of equal or less expertise than yourself has a direct bearing on you. Such help will at least be returned at some time. In particular, less skilled players will begin to look toward your PC (and you) as a mentor or heroic element of the group. With such benefits, the reason for RPG participation is broadened as this occurs.

### PROBLEM PLAYERS

A problem player, or more than one, may surface within a player group, particularly when the group has just been formed and is going through its own particular breaking-in process. Although the obvious manifestation of the problem is in the player himself, the root of the problem often lies in how the GM views his role in the playing group and how he conducts himself and the play sessions under his control. To put it another way: if the GM is or appears to be willing to let players get away with certain actions and types of behavior, then a player who was so inclined to begin with will certainly take advantage of the opportunity.

If the game master is a novice, or tends to be weak in his direction of the players, difficulties can arise. If the GM is unwilling to take effective control, one or more of the other participants must then do so, meanwhile encouraging the GM during nonplaying time, so that authority will be vested in the proper party as soon as possible. Following are brief descriptions of the various types of uncooperative players and suggestions for what must be done to cure the maladies they bring with them.

The **bully** orders other players or even the GM to do this and that, threatening to take it out on PCs or actual persons if his

demands are not complied with. Group pressure is the surest and perhaps the only way to stop this behavior; everyone must make it clear, by telling the offender directly and simply, that he must quit his bullying or else he will be excluded from the group. If some in the playing group are hesitant to take direct action, the superior player will have to attempt to handle the matter alone or in conjunction with any others of the group who desire to maintain a high standard of gaming. Ignoring the instructions and demands of the bully, followed by rebuke and eventually even PC confrontation to eliminate the obstreperous player's character, must be steps that the superior player is willing to undertake.

*The know-it-all* is a form of bully who tries to assert dominance and control through a blatant display of superior knowledge. This player always rattles forth a stream of quotes from the rules and tells the other players what he thinks they should do. While a master player readily shares information, a know-it-all tries to use his knowledge as a control mechanism to dominate the group. Handling one of these sorts is usually rather simple when the know-it-all really *doesn't* know it all; generally, the others should follow the steps for elimination of a bully. However, what if the individual is *correct* most of the time? The problem is then one of personality and social acceptability. The superior player must then personally draw the know-it-all aside and attempt to reason with him. The result, if the offender sees the light and mends his ways, could be a master player. Understanding of the group, the need for individuality, and the right to personal expression that belongs to each and every participant must be accepted by such an individual. At that point, the know-it-all becomes the sagacious expert to whom the group will look for advice and counsel.

The *adviser* is a restrained know-it-all who does not broadcast his knowledge (whether actual or not) all the time but still finds it irresistible to put in his proverbial two cents' worth at every opportunity presented by others-and it usually isn't worth a fraction of that. Refutation of obviously foolish advice will serve to silence such individuals in most cases. After one or two times when the offender's obvious inability to offer worthwhile instruction has been demonstrated, the entire group should be brought to

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the stage of development that it can collectively silence such an individual permanently. However, sometimes such adviser types are more often right than not. In this case, either they need a more advanced group to participate with or else the majority of the other players are lazy and are allowing the adviser to do their thinking willingly. Personal discussion with the adviser and careful assessment of the group are necessary in such a case. Forming an alliance with the individual, with an understanding that his silence will help build self-reliance and a higher level of play within the group, might prove profitable to all, in that you and he can work together effectively to strengthen your PCs, while the others in the group benefit from the necessity of forming opinions and making decisions on their own.

The cheater isn't so brave as to try to bully the group, but he is so self-centered and insecure that everything he performs, affects, or acquires, from dice rolls to character possessions and abilities, must be monitored. Otherwise the whole group will suffer, for the cheater is seldom a capable player. As was pointed out in Chapter 2 in a different context, cheating in an RPG is similar to cheating at a game of solitaire. In the latter case, though, only the individual is shorted. The cheater in a role-playing game affects the whole group, and so such an individual must be forced to change or be eliminated from the group as soon as the fault is seen. Public attention to each discovered instance of such activity should shame the cheater into acceptable behavior, or else he must be asked to leave the group. If no others will join in ridding the group of a cheater, the superior player must take the responsibility. Even though it is properly the duty of the GM, a player can also protect his group in such circumstances. Allowing a cheat to remain in the group is a tacit acceptance of cheating, and the esteem of the others for the game will suffer if the practice is allowed to go on unchecked.

The *pouter* is an insecure cheat and bully in combination. This sort of individual cares nothing about the group, and he would probably bully all, or cheat to have his way, if he had the courage. Usually such thoughtless persons cannot be reasoned with or changed. They'll argue and be disruptive, refuse to participate,



and try to spoil the fun for everyone else. When this occurs, the superior player must immediately take charge for the moment. The group should be encouraged to continue play, ignoring the pouting member completely. If the behavior is a tactic left over from childhood days, the group will penalize the activity merely by having fun without the pouter. The offender will then either modify his activity thereafter or else quit the group. If he is determined to spoil the game, then he must be asked firmly but politely to cease the pouting disruption or behave in such manner elsewhere.

The last example of a problem player to be considered here is the *talker*. These folk come in two distinct categories. The first is the sociable sort who merely wants to converse with his friends at every opportunity. Granted, he is selfish and inconsiderate, but he doesn't usually mean any actual harm to the game. His activity, talking, is of far greater meaning to him than the game, for the play is simply an excuse for socialization. Such a social talker can be corrected by interrupting him to call attention to the play at hand. Assuming that others in the group desire to play, and chat with each other only in the context of the game activity, then the talker will end up either going to a tavern or social club for his gratification or else turning his attention to the reason for the group being together in the first place-the game.

The second sort of talker is more difficult to handle. He is the sort who has a lack of knowledge or skill, is insecure about this, and believes that his deficiency can be concealed by chatter. Often he will try to show that his acting ability is superior and use theatrics and overdramatization to cover for his lack of knowledge and playing skill. Both types of talkers possibly can be dealt with by requesting silence, encouraging play instead of prattle, and interjecting meaningful suggestions for direct game action. In most cases, however, the entire group or at least the majority must display disapproval, or else these individuals will rattle on and on, convinced by the lack of complaint from others that their monologues and posturing are appreciated or at least not resented.

Even the best of playing groups, which are either not hand-

icapped by the just-described problem players or are able to solve those problems, will sometimes contain individuals who simply are not compatible. This can cause hostilities among PCs or among players, or in both venues. Even if they are able to restrain themselves on a player-to-player basis, unskilled players often allow emotions to affect their participation. If two players don't like each other, this antipathy may be expressed through words and deeds of their game personas. Since this sort of conduct is almost always "out of character" (considering that PCs in a group should be working together), the conflict is easy for others in the playing group to recognize. If conciliatory measures do not work, then one or another of the hostile players must be removed from the play group-or at least they must be separated so as to avoid having both individuals at a play session. If the game master seems unaware of the problem or unwilling to take the proper measures, then the players involved in the conflict must use their influence to see that the GM solves the problem.

Sometimes players of superior or better skill can cope with player-versus-player hostility that manifests itself in conflict between PCs. In fact, the additional challenge posed by this factor might actually enhance the excitement of a play session if the players are all mature and accomplished. Nevertheless, such internal strife usually is unacceptable on a long-term basis.

In addition to situations involving people who have trouble getting along with each other from the outset, there are hostility situations that develop over a period of time. These most usually occur when players are at a relatively unsophisticated level of play. Friction commonly starts when the actions of one or more of the other PCs within the campaign are seen as being hostile toward the character of another participant. There is an emotional reaction by the put-upon player, and a feud begins. Logically, the hostilities between the PCs involved would not extend beyond those particular game personas. For example, Smith and Black are antagonists of Jones, all three being particular characters played by game participants; but the actual players themselves do not have and do not develop any hostilities toward each other. They

role-play the antagonism; they do not live it. Superior players begin to approach use of role-playing and personal dissociation to such an extent, but those of less experience and skill will not.

Even though the latter type of hostility can often be handled and kept in its proper place by mature participants, it is undesirable. Not only does PC-versus-PC hostility lessen the chance of survival of all the PCs, but the tensions created by antagonism of this sort must be felt by the playing group, regardless of their best efforts to contain and isolate the conflict, and the group's enjoyment of the game is reduced proportionately. In virtually any imaginable case, personality conflicts of any sort must be recognized and resolved rapidly in order to maintain the viability of the playing group.

## THE PROBLEM GM

Now that we have gone on at length about problem players and problems among players and how to deal with them, it is time (high time, you players might be saying) to address the game master's proper role and responsibility within the playing group. This topic was touched on in Chapter 3, because working well within the group is crucial to becoming a master GM, but the subject deserves a more intense and extensive look.

The game master should derive his satisfaction from entertaining the associated group, from testing them and seeing them succeed, and from the approbation they give him in return. But it is possible that through lack of maturity or because of some personal insecurity, the game master might view the player group as hostile and/or as a vehicle for his personal attainment of self-enhancement through denigration of the player group's worth. Such circumstances are extremely difficult to overcome, and the individual who evidences these traits is probably not ready to tackle the job of being a GM. Maturity comes, if at all, through age and experience. Perhaps the experience of general rejection of the attitude demonstrated by an immature game master will bring a rapid development to the transgressing individual. Being faced with a shape-up-or-we'll-ship-out situation might cause the individual to revise his attitude and express himself in behavior pat-

terms that are acceptable to the player participants. That is hoped for but not generally expected; again, usually the only cure for such behavior is time and the maturity that comes with the passage of years.

Another undesirable and potentially disastrous situation is that in which the game master regards the other participants as mere puppets. In such a campaign, the players will be used to build the ego of the GM, who relishes his position of arbiter and controller so much that he loses sight of -or never even gains sight of-the real reasons for play of the game. Clever “puppeteer” GMs might actually limit themselves to acting this way toward a select few in the group while treating the others more or less the way all should be treated. If anything, this sort of puppeteer is worse than the one who treats all players with disdain and disrespect-because he proves, by his comparatively fair treatment of part of the group, that he **does** know how he really ought to be acting. This kind of attitude can spread like a cancer through the playing group if the players who are being treated properly feed the GM’s ego even more by supporting and approving of his actions toward the downtrodden ones. No campaign containing such participants can exist for long. The reasons are obvious, and I will not deal further with the subject. A new campaign must be had, and that suffices.

Even those game masters who have the right attitude toward the player group as players still must beware of spoiling things for the group by treating the player **characters** in an unfair or inappropriate fashion. Before going further with this point, I must acknowledge that some game systems are designed to allow termination of PC continuity without termination of the campaign milieu. In such game systems, new PCs tend to spring full-grown into the world, powerful and ready for a wide variety of problems, without the usual gradual acquisition of knowledge and skill. Such games are convenient for the GM with strictly limited time, groups whose component players are likely to vary widely from session to session, and for those who are unwilling or unable to make long-term commitments to development of game personas. Game systems of this sort are actually not common-but the

method of game mastering used by some people would make one believe otherwise.

What I'm getting at here is a phenomenon called the killer campaign, something that even a GM with the best of intentions can precipitate if he is not careful and does not have a strong sense of the scope and spirit of the game. In this kind of activity, the GM thinks nothing of putting unbeatable foes and insurmountable obstacles before the PCs at every turn. The result, of course, is that the PCs are killed or so severely incapacitated that they are no longer viable. But this is of no import to the "killer GM" or to the players who meekly or ignorantly tolerate his methods; after all, new PCs are a dime a dozen, aren't they?

No, they're not! The killer campaign basically defeats the principal reason for becoming involved in RPG activity, for it eliminates the vehicle via which participants gain ongoing satisfaction—their PCs, which are created and which exist so that they can be developed and nurtured. Unless the game system is specifically designed to accommodate dime-a-dozen NPCs (and, as pointed out before, this type of game is not common), then anything even remotely resembling a killer campaign is simply not the way to play.

At the other extreme is what we will refer to as the easy-reward campaign, which is not as immediately or as obviously contrary to good game playing as the killer campaign but is just as great a perversion of the game and just as likely (in the long run, if not sooner) to lead to the dissolution of the playing group and the campaign. In this sort of activity, the GM desires (or is talked into) keeping players happy by lavishing wealth, fame, and power upon PCs—giving rewards in grossly ridiculous proportion to the effort the characters expended or the accomplishments they achieved.

All of us would admit, I hope, that what is gained through planning and effort is more satisfying than what is unexpected and unearned. Still, the easy way, as they say, is attractive on the surface. If a GM is easy, how can players resist taking undeserved rewards from a too-willing hand? Taking this a step further, what about player groups who pressure reluctant game masters into

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giving rewards that are too great for the effort and success demonstrated by the PCs?

Worst of all the easy-reward campaigns are those in which the play sessions are actually run by player groups who browbeat the GM into allowing changes in the rules or alteration of the game system's spirit in order to facilitate the players' self-gratification urges and ego tripping. It is academic whether the fault for such a campaign lies with the self-interested players or the weak-willed GM who condones their behavior by allowing it to continue and to pervert the campaign. In any event, the playing group has a severe problem that must be recognized and addressed by all its members to avoid what will otherwise inevitably occur.

When one has uncountable wealth or immeasurable power, each increment of that wealth or power is practically valueless. The gain of a hundred dollars is a great boon to someone who only has a small amount of money to begin with—but what difference does a measly one hundred make to someone who has millions in his vaults? The player group in an easy-reward campaign eventually loses interest at a point when further acquisitions mean little or nothing to the members but usually before their characters have achieved anything of real significance. Play ceases, and all the game campaign's participants have lost their investment before it could bring proper returns to them.

The GM who bows to player pressure has not only lost his investment in the game campaign, but he has probably lost the respect of those who were associated with him. Even the players will be likely to feel a loss of self-respect for what they did. In the case of the player group whose thirst for power and glory, as it were, causes them to force a perversion of the intent of the role-playing game upon the GM and possibly others as well, the results are the same, but there is a reversal. The campaign ends with the game master having lessened respect for the players, along with loss of self-respect to a lesser degree. Participants on the player level will have lost much of their self-respect, with lesser loss of regard for the GM. What a shame for this to happen, when avoidance of the errors made is so relatively easy a matter for thinking and caring individuals.

## MASTERY IS GROUP SUCCESS

Mastery requires individual effort and group operation. It is recognized by the group initially and is broadened through the efforts of the group; the higher its level of expertise, the greater the merit of the recognition. There can be no question that the degree of ability demonstrated must be higher if the group as a whole is superior. The analogy of a champion professional sports team is apt. To be a member of the team indicates an unusual degree of excellence. Without the other members, no player's talents could stand forth because the sport requires a team. Recognition for the team comes when it succeeds in championship play. For the individual, it is augmented by inclusion on all-star teams and in a hall of fame. While RPG enthusiasts do not have the same monetary incentives as professional athletes, and their play is strictly for the sake of the game, the analogy is otherwise most applicable.

It is interesting to point out that mastery of the subject might also bring additional reward. While the role-playing game hobby boasts no professional league and no customers who pay to see people play, RPG activity does offer some financial rewards for masters who are willing and able to exert themselves further. There are small tournament prizes to be gained. There are periodicals that pay for articles and stories that appeal to the gaming audience. There are firms that employ persons with knowledge of the subject. And, yes, there are publishers who pay fees or royalties for games and other works relating to role-playing.

Whatever rewards you seek, all that might come are based on the play group. As a member of this team, you must know how to invest your efforts to enable the team to become more successful. As you pursue individual excellence and strive toward mastery, you must always bear in mind that it is possible only through your interaction with your RPG group. Your entire investment in the game genre, your survey of the field, selection of a topic, study of the rules, and application of what you have learned should be used to benefit the group. By knowing how to assist the group, you

increase your own abilities proportionately. In turn, the group assists you in furthering your knowledge and enhances your skills. As you assist it in moving upward in expertise, it carries you along. The synergism of the group is integral to mastery.

Assuming that a group does not contain any problem players and is being overseen by a GM who is running a rational and reasonable campaign, then how do the members know if and when they have achieved some measure of success in group cooperation? It is not easy to attach values or labels to success in an RPG activity, since there is no scorekeeping as such and no universal, totally quantifiable standards by which success can be *measured*.

However, success in a group context can be *defined*, and the best place to begin with the definition is by delineating what does not constitute success. As was alluded to in Chapter 2, some persons erroneously believe success to be indicated by the high status of their player characters. In a similar vein, some game masters think that if their campaigns have a large number of such inflated characters, this is a mark of their own success. By and large, neither standard is correct. Success is defined in the following ways:

If we accept the obvious truth that not all the members of a group can achieve the same degree of success at the same time, then it follows that one player or one PC realizes some degree of success before others attain that level. This happens when the group gives recognition to the player or one or more of that player's PCs through reliance upon him during play sessions, at first, and then through the telling and retelling of tales relating to play sessions that featured the individual's PC(s). The second stage of success is reached when the player's or PC's accomplishments are so noteworthy that the GLM also exhibits reliance upon the player and engages in the storytelling activity.

The third stage of success comes when the group develops several players who are outstanding because they are all the objects of reliance and the subjects of tales and stories about their exploits and achievements. When any player group reaches this



stage, the limelight spreads out to encompass the GM; if not for his ability and patience, the players would not have been able to achieve what they have. Thus the third stage of player and player-group success is also the first definable stage of success for the GM and the playing group.

The next stage of success is reached when the players and GM participate with successful results in gaming events outside the group-tournament play, as well as publication in amateur and professional periodicals. "Success" in the context of tournament play is a different concept from "success" in the group endeavor, since tournament success can be measured, at least in relative terms, by assessing the performance of the players and GM in comparison with other tournament contestants. Unsuccessful participation in a tournament is not a disgrace; few players or GMs achieve top results in their first exposure to such activity. But the next stage of group achievement can only be claimed when at least most of the members are experienced and accomplished enough to place well consistently in tournaments. Similarly, few persons who desire to be published in gaming periodicals get a manuscript accepted on the first try, but perseverance and a continual increase in knowledge and skill will usually pay off.

The highest plateau of group success comes when at least one of the players or the GM of a group receives general acclaim throughout the segment of the hobby interested in the same form of RPG in which the group has become highly proficient. No matter what one may think of his own prowess-and it may be great indeed-there is nothing to compare with the respect and admiration of one's peers. If you are one of the hardworking and fortunate few who become known and renowned among the rank and file of those involved in a common activity, then you- and by well-deserved association, the others in your group-have made it to the top of the mountain.



# Chapter 5



## RULES:

# CONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION

Now that we have examined the human components of the role-playing-game hobby and described what it takes for players and GMs to attain excellence as individuals and as groups, it is time to discuss the general framework within which participants operate -the rules of the game. In this chapter, you will learn about the major pieces that comprise any RPG framework, how they fit together, and about how pieces from different games might be combined into an entirely new and unique game form to suit the special needs and desires of a playing group.

### PROVIDING STRUCTURE

Technicalities aside, certain common areas must be accounted for in any set of RPG rules. These common areas are: objective; time and distance scales; movement rates; combat (missile and hand-to-hand); types of characters (or creatures); technical data; and

rewards. They provide the basic structure of role-playing games. These common areas need not be presented in any special order, although as given here, they do reflect the structure typical of military miniatures rules, the roots of RPGs.

When the purpose of the game-its objective-becomes evident, the reader must be prepared to accept a tremendous departure from the objectives of other types of games. How does one win the game? Well, there is no actual winner. What, then, is the object of playing? To have fun, of course. You see, you can survive and become a master spy, a mighty wizard, or the head of a tribe. That all sounds pretty silly, and it is unless one considers the entertainment provided, the social interaction, and the educational value. That aside, it is important to know the objective given in the rules, if any. What is stated there is one of the major keys to unlocking the spirit of the game, as described in Chapter 2.

The prosaic *time and distance* scales might seem technical but are nevertheless fairly understandable. On a large-scale map, one inch might represent a thousand miles. Yet in role-playing with one-to-one representation, it is common to deal with scales of feet, yards, or meters as well. The scales of time and distance tell you much of what is to be expected from the game. Brief time scales — one turn in the game equaling ten seconds of real time, for example-indicate a highly complicated and time-consuming attempt at realism. (A turn, for this purpose, is a span of time during which a player character or creature can take one specific action.) Generally speaking, the more real time one turn represents, the more play-oriented (as opposed to realism-oriented) the game is. Likewise, distance scales that do not demand precision measurement tend to indicate a game in which play, as opposed to realism, is emphasized.

The *movement rates* given in the rules are directly related to time and distance scales, naturally. At least they should be. Movement might be separated into several broad categories according to type and scale. Large-scale map movement, expressed (for instance) in miles per hour or miles per day, should be given for when one is traveling from one locale to another. Medium-scale exploration movement, perhaps in yards per hour, might be in-

eluded for activity of the sort indicated by the name. Finally, there is small-scale movement, defined in yards per minute or feet per second, when the participants' game personas are involved in combat or other close-quarters operations with enemy figures.

Of course, basic movement rates are subject to modifications to account for circumstances. What about the terrain the figure is moving on? Are there any hostile creatures impeding progress? The reader must be able to envision such effects. If the rules are detailed with regard to movement modifications, much is said thereby about the aim of the game system. Participants are expected to be able to envision details of the imagined action and revel in the minutiae of it all. If, as with time and distance scales, movement is treated in a general fashion, the game advocates role-playing in lieu of tactical details.

Make-believe *combat*, whether of the lethal or nonlethal sort, certainly requires a suspension of disbelief and very active belief. Obviously, role games have much imaginary action. Were it otherwise, they would not be so popular. Whether it is combat by magic, an exchange of weapon swings between medieval knights, energy blasts from spaceships in titanic formations, or whatever, it must be explained and structured to allow for scale and movement as well as the effect of weapons. Whether it's a group of detectives about to bring a criminal gang to bay, colorful heroes in the comic-book mold confronting supervillains, investigators of the supernatural uncovering a nest of alien monsters, or bold adventurers piercing the heart of a fantastic underground lair of evil, the core of the game is the combat between the players' characters and the nonplayer opponents controlled by the game master. Problem solving might well be required to get to the combat, and similar activity might take place thereafter. The whole adventure might be sprinkled with conflict situations not necessarily involving combat, but the heart of the action—its most exciting moments — must be related to combat of a personal sort. Rules systems that are virtually nothing but combat are, without question, not role-playing game systems. Those that relegate such activity to an adjunctive position are best understood as overemphasizing role-playing to the exclusion of gaming. The combat portion of the

rules reveals an RPG structure for what it is. Some RPGs will stand as virtual battle games, some as abortive attempts at theatrical training, but most will lie somewhere in between.

The manner in which players approach the challenges and opportunities of the RPG will be defined by the types of characters available for their use in play. Some games express the parameters of this activity by tightly defined professions (character types, or adventurers) that can be played at. Others give far broader terms to define the players' game personas, but they then define the scope of activities possible through areas of expertise or ability (skills, or proficiencies). Whichever system the RPG utilizes (and there are pros and cons for both), the selection and development of the game persona modifies the game norm to a greater or lesser extent. The intent of the game and its rules is revealed to a considerable extent by examination of this area. If the objective of play is not clearly defined, a careful analysis of the approaches to play offered here will point the reader toward the spirit of the game. The author had an intent when the game was designed, and the revelation gained from a study of the types of characters permitted (or suggested) for play will discover much that is otherwise left unsaid.

No matter what types of player characters are used in the game, conflict and interaction involving the PCs occurs through the use of opponent and neutral characters and creatures, collectively referred to as monsters. All, or most, of these beings are controlled by the game master. They can run the gamut from horrible-looking nonhuman animals, plants, and mineral creatures to humans who look-and may even act-very much like the PCs themselves. (When monsters have human or near-human form, they may be referred to as non-player characters, or NPCs.) While there are some natural forces to contend with during the course of any campaign (rugged terrain, extreme temperatures, inclement weather, etc.), these are minimal in comparison to the challenges that will be presented by the GM through his placement and use of monsters. Setting aside disbelief, the game participants must become thoroughly conversant with all characteristics of these beings. Whether mythical beast, robot, or something in between,

it is mandatory to know your enemy. The powers given to opponent and neutral beings delineate the expected power and performance of the players' personas in the role-playing-game campaign. Beginning player characters will be forced to contend with relatively weak monsters. Then, as the players' expertise increases and their player characters become more powerful, the GM will gradually stiffen the opposition by adding more powerful opponents. The opponent is surely the measure of the range of PC power within the game system. Just as participants must know their own capabilities with respect to their game personas, they must also know the abilities of the beings who will oppose them. A flyswatter is used for small insects, a cannon for behemoths, and in some cases the "victory" goes to the fleetest of foot.

The nuts and bolts of the whole RPG structure are covered by the *technical data* area. How certain devices perform, how magic works, what psionic (mental) powers actually are in game terms, what weapons do, and so forth all fall into this category. A large section of any good set of RPG rules will consist of technical data. The more removed from reality the genre of the game, the greater the amount of so-called technical data that must be given. When the author deals with fanciful material or facts obscured by the passage of time, space must be given to such material to enable participants to grasp the setting and play the roles of make-believe persons who are part of it. Thus fantasy games must describe magic, mythical monsters, and so forth. Science fiction role games deal with aliens, unknown planets, advanced technology, and so forth. In contemporary settings, the game rules may assume that more background knowledge is available to participants; therefore, technical data in such rules can be more limited or else deal in greater detail with specifics aimed at highlighting some particular portion of play.

Because a participant does not "win" an RPG in the traditional sense of the word, *rewards* in such a game come in the form of augmentation of the PC. The rewards for successful completion of a particular episode are defined in the rules and vary from system to system, but all have the general effect of making the player character more powerful and able to cope with bigger problems

and more difficult opponents. These include monetary rewards, new equipment, more or greater skills, enhanced powers, the acquisition of NPC followers or allies, increased status in rank or social position, and so on. In a rewards system, it is common to have several of these benefits, or most of them, in some mix. In addition to defining what rewards are obtainable, the rules will specify how they can be obtained. The ease or difficulty of gaining rewards indicates how rapidly one will be able to build a PC within the game. This, measured against the lethality of the combat system and the powers of the opponents, tells the participant two things:

First, it indicates how long he or she can expect to retain a game persona in an active state within the campaign. Due to death or to outgrowing the level of challenge, it is usual for a player character to end campaign activity at some point. In some RPG systems, death or dominance occurs too rapidly to allow participants to enjoy the game fully. A few are too slow to award increases, so there is no sense of progress or achievement.

Second, it provides a way to measure the general rate at which player characters gain power. If PCs begin with relatively great power and tend to have few rewards, the game is either one in which problem solving is emphasized over role-playing or else one in which mortality of PCs is high.

Whether or not there are additional features to the rules, the whole must be read, understood, analyzed, and applied by participants who expect to become masters of role-playing. Life has many facets, and there are many approaches to it in different cultures. Role-playing games can be compared to life in this regard. The rules are the standards that are applied to game life. The game is the culture. Before one can operate successfully within a culture, it is necessary to know the standards. We are raised within a culture, so its standards are ingrained in us from infancy. The morals, ethics, and dangers are taught to us. Rewards and punishments modify our behavior. In similar fashion, the rules of a role-playing game attempt to describe a culture based upon an adventurous life of make-believe. The study and absorption of those rules equates to the real-life indoctrination we re-

ceive as we grow through childhood to become adults and (it is hoped) gain the knowledge and ability to function capably and successfully within our culture.

### ADDING FLAVOR

In addition to providing the structure that enables participants to operate their characters within the game milieu, the rules of a **role-playing** game also describe the elements that give a certain game its particular flavor. To have a good chance of being exciting and enjoyable (and thus popular), a role-playing game must contain seven major elements, with varying degrees of emphasis placed on each one depending on the intention of the author. The elements are these:

1. wonder and fear
2. adventure and heroism
3. problem solving
4. role-playing
5. combat, conflict, and battle
6. group operation
7. enlightenment and education

The first element, *wonder* and *fear*, underlies the popularity of the whole hobby of role-playing games. Fantasy, science fiction, and horror are the most popular RPG subjects, and these topics are certainly filled with wonder and fear-wonder because the game world is different from our everyday reality, and fear because of our instinctive tendency to be apprehensive about that which we do not fully comprehend or understand. In contrast, a role-playing game designed around the everyday life of a librarian or a census taker (to choose a couple of absurd examples) would not be likely to infuse the players with an appropriate sense of wonder and fear.

The element of ***adventure and*** heroism is present to a measurable degree in all role-playing games in which player characters are called upon to perform remarkable feats under adverse condi-



tions. Fantasy, science fiction, and horror games all have this element, and it is present to an even greater degree in topics such as espionage, “pulp heroes,” and comic book characters.

All of **us** enjoy **problem solving**. There’s nothing like the sense of satisfaction we get from using our minds to solve or accomplish something, whether it’s as elementary as finishing a crossword puzzle or as complex as designing the world’s best role-playing game. Every good RPG contains some provisions for problem solving by the player characters: How does that magical device function? Which of the trees in that grove is actually a sentient alien life form? Is that friendly agent actually who he claims to be? Brute force is not always the way to achieve a desired goal, and a good RPG will offer player characters opportunities to use their wits as well as their weapons.

**Role-playing** is fourth on the list not because it is less important than the first three elements, but for symbolic reasons, because it lies at the center of what an RPG is all about. However, while it might come as a shock to certain people, role-playing is not the **reason** for the existence of role games. Role-playing is the **vehicle** through which play becomes possible. It is a means, not an end. Thus, the RPG might heavily emphasize role-playing-acting, as it were-or the system might well focus on one or another of the elements of the game. This in and of itself neither adds to nor detracts from the work. The important thing is that the elements in combination allow the participants to enjoy play on an ongoing basis.

One distinction must be brought to the forefront again here. Certain games claim to have a basis in role-playing while in fact all they offer is an aspect of role gaming. These designs feature **role assumption**. That is, you are given a game persona-you do not create and personalize the character you are to play. Typically, the situations you find the character in are also prescribed by the game. Choices are limited, and game play will always be channeled and of relatively short duration. Do not be misled by claims to the contrary. Role-playing and role assumption are quite different.

Multiple-choice books are typical of role assumption game

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designs. I am the co-author of four such books (Sagard the Barbarian gamebooks, written with Flint Dille). These works are fun and have all the elements of role-playing games except for actual role-playing. Even more than one person can participate, since the hero has occasional associates who can be played by others. Such books, along with far too many games, might deceive the participants into believing that they are engaging in role-playing. Role assumption is similar to role-playing, and it is good training for the more exacting and exciting play of RPGs. But it is a different and lesser game form, I believe.

**Conflict, combat, and battle** are integral to all games. A role-playing game might stress one, two, or all three of these subelements. However, in an RPG, the opposition comes not from beings represented by other players but from characters and creatures under the control of the GM. (This fact does not prohibit conflict among player characters, of course, but it does discourage such activity.) In a game in which conflict is more important than combat, outwitting and overcoming opponents is encouraged, and make-believe aggression of the physical sort is limited to the nonlethal variety. Any good RPG will make some provision for **combat** of both the nonlethal and lethal sort. Whether characters are using fists, clubs, rapiers, or guns, combat is on a one-to-one basis. That is, single characters contest with each other—perhaps one versus more than one, but each entity is but a single one-for-supremacy. **Battle** is large-scale combat involving great numbers of adversaries and is usually reflected on a basis other than one-to-one for less powerful (noncharacter) creatures. A great stress on conflict is acceptable in an RPG—but if combat and battle are more dominant than conflict, the reader should examine the rules carefully to see if role-playing has been set aside in favor of role assumption. Worse still, the system might be a military simulation or a war game masquerading as a role-playing game. This is not to denigrate either of these types of games, for I personally play and enjoy both. It is pointed out to differentiate and define role-playing games. If one cannot define the subject matter, one cannot possibly expect to master it. Knowing how to deal with conflict, combat, and even large-scale battle can only assist in developing a

broad expertise in role-playing games. It is crucial to understand what one is engaging in and put the activity into proper perspective.

To engage in actual role-playing games requires at least two participants, one as game master, the other as player. Because RPGs are designed to provide ongoing play, it is necessary to have a greater number of players than one and desirable to have more than two. Thus we come to *group operation* (and cooperation). There can be conflicts among PCs, real or game prescribed, without unduly affecting the group operation and cooperation requirement. But when combat between player characters occurs frequently, hostility among players is fostered and long-term participation by player personas is threatened as a result. This conflicts with the nature of the whole genre of RPGs. They tend to be a social (peer) group activity, and when the games stop being friendly, the playing ends and the group dissolves. The stronger the provisions within the rules for encouraging cooperation, the better the game. Again, it is worth noting that a desire for mastery subsumes the ongoing nature of the activity. To invest effort in a work that is internally geared to destroy itself is unwise. On the other hand, a game that is structured to absolutely prevent any PC-versus-PC conflict is likely to be so limiting as to give rise to serious doubts about the whole system as a choice for serious study.

What is the best number of players for maximum enjoyment of a play session? The answer to that question certainly hinges on the particular game system used and also on the nature of the current episode in which the player characters are involved. As a general rule, one GM can manage three or four players while maintaining a high level of attention to all elements of the game. If the GM has an assistant, one who is knowledgeable and ready to do dice rolling, record keeping, and similar detail work, the group size can be doubled without unduly affecting the overall level of play. On rare occasions, two persons can be so well attuned as to be able to co-master a game. This not only allows a group of at least six to eight players to be well entertained but may make it possible for the player characters to divide occasionally into separate

parties. With appropriate assistants, the co-GMs may be able to accommodate as many as a dozen or so active players. But if the number of players exceeds three or four per master/assistant, then elements of the game must be sacrificed. Just as with teacher/student ratios in the classroom, individual attention is necessary to assure proper attention to each participant without overworking some and ignoring others. The system you select for mastery should be attuned to this.

Last, but certainly not least, we have the element of *enlightenment* and *education*. The game system should in and of itself provide enlightenment. This applies to the correct and expert play of the game proper and also to the genre and the milieu in which it is set. Rules should provide a continuing learning experience in both areas, and by rules I refer not only to the main body of the work but also to supplemental material provided or alluded to by the game's author. With this enlightenment comes education in the mechanics of the game, plus education in the genre and milieu. The latter, most certainly, will come only if the participant pursues study on his own. All RPGs should, in fact, encourage such study and provide information as to what sources can be consulted for this effort. Note that there is no reference in this passage to traditional educational values. While the play and mastery of role games will unquestionably broaden the individual considerably and add to his education, the pursuit of mastery of RPGs need not concern itself with this subject. It is probable that some work will eventually address itself to this topic, but this book will not.

By examining the content and structure of the rules and how the rules address the seven major elements of a role-playing game system, the reader can gain a sound grasp of the game. An understanding of the spirit of the work is brought to mind and nurtured, and a measure of what the work is and where it will lead can be made. It is necessary to have done all this as a firm foundation for masterful participation in role games.

## DEFINING PARAMETERS OF PLAY

One more topic pertaining to rules must be dealt with before moving on to other subjects. Rules define the parameters of **play**—what actions can and cannot be taken, how play proceeds, what aims are set forth, and what goals are stated. Knowing the boundaries, so to speak, of the game world gives the participant the “laws” of the milieu, its systems of action, and all else that is set forth to bring the game into being as a shadow of actual life. The more intense the shadow, the more entertaining the game. The rules, however, must never clutter the game reality. Think of trying to live in real life while constantly having to call to mind the physical laws of the universe. Then add in the secular laws and religious ones as well. Some RPG systems do this in an attempt to be realistic.

The parameters of the game delineate, for the reader of the rules, just what is possible. Therefore, the reader must compare what is written and implied with what he expects from the game. One does not study accounting to become a surgeon. In the same way that the mesh between expectation and provision is taken care of, the parameters of the game rules also inform the astute participant just what is allowed in the game system. It is foolish to devote a great deal of effort to mastering a particular RPG and then to attempt to move outside the parameters while attempting to maintain the system. The complexities of a well-designed role-playing game are such that there is a balance that must be kept. Attempting to disrupt the balance while maintaining use of the system is an effort not dissimilar to attempting to graft wings onto pigs to enable them to fly. For instance, if the participant desires to play the game with a persona who engages in modern methods of crime detection, the basis for gaming should not be a system that does not feature this activity.

In their desire to control, not master, the play of an RPG, some enthusiastic participants devise “improvements.” These alterations of the parameters of the system are usually aimed at produc-

ing a particular result-allowing the “improver’s” game persona to become the most powerful one within the particular campaign. In addition to accomplishing nothing in the way of making the person an expert in the field, such tinkering tends to destroy game campaigns-or even whole game systems, if a sufficient number of participants give credence to the merits of the supposed improvement. Instead of taking this approach, the one seeking mastery understands the limits of the game system and intelligently utilizes them during participation. The rules define what can and cannot be done with regard to specific (and general) areas. The *spirit* draws in the remainder of the boundaries; for, as is well understood, the best of RPG rules cannot hope to cover all of what must go into a game that reflects make-believe or actual life. At the risk of belaboring the point, here is an example:

No thinking participant would seek to create a game persona who was a liberal, pacifist, nonviolent crusader for world harmony in a system based on survival after a worldwide holocaust. Yet to a lesser degree, this frequently occurs in RPG campaigns. Game masters beware!

Once you have in mind the parameters of play, just about anything that adheres to the spirit of the game is permissible. In fact, the master participant will excel in understanding and utilizing the intent of the game. Thus, true expertise will shine forth. Knowing the limitations imposed by the rules and implied by the spirit of the work does not place undue limitations on creativity and imagination. As has been pointed out, no set of rules, no matter how voluminous, can possibly define more than a fraction of the possibilities inherent in the intelligent pursuit of a well-designed game system. The author of such a work desires this, for the participants must have ample room for personalizing the game campaign through imaginative and individual creativity within the boundaries of the work. Minor variances from rules or solidification of vague guidelines are but a small portion of activity within the parameters. The master of the role-playing game creates cultures, political systems, societies, secret groups, strange inventions, new races, or whatever else gives greater depth and

breadth to the campaign. Players innovate approaches to solving the problems, dealing with the conflicts, or defining their roles within the system offered by the game.

Solomon said that there was nothing new under the sun. Role-playing games are simply a recombining of existing elements to form a new compound heretofore unknown. By understanding the parameters of the game, actual and implied, the master gamer has the wherewithal to recombine the elements of the system to create compounds that conform to the milieu he has chosen to operate within.

## **REMODELING THE RULES**

So it is possible for the members of each playing group (principally the GM, but the players also have input) to “remodel” their game, adding accessories of both a functional and a decorative nature to the framework given by the rules. The use of the word “remodel” is intentional, for the process has much in common with the construction and reconstruction of a house or other sort of building.

,411 such structures have common components-walls, floors, ceiling, roof-but the variations on the basic theme are almost as numerous as the people who design and execute the variations. In building or changing your house to make it the way you want it, you have latitude in determining where the windows and doors will go. Perhaps you want this section slightly elevated over that other section. What room will visitors first see when they enter the house from the outside? What path(s) can they take to get from one room to another? Decisions and answers such as these are within your purview, because you are the one who is building the house and the one who should enjoy living in it when it is finished.

So it is with the design of a role-playing game campaign. The game master’s “house” may look much the same as another GM’s from the outside, if both are based on the same framework (rules). But if a visitor peeks inside the front door of each place, he may find two remarkably different approaches to interior decoration.

It is possible that after living in one house for a time, the GM

and his family (the player group) may decide to move into a house of a different style. This sort of change can be refreshing, even exhilarating, but it is usually not without its drawbacks. Some of the furniture you had in your first house may have to be replaced because it doesn't fit the style of the new home or because it is too large or too small. Perhaps the new house has fewer electrical outlets than the old one had, so you must either reconcile yourself to that fact or else do some rewiring- but be careful not to blow a fuse!

Domiciles can be rebuilt and drastically changed in the process. If the project is undertaken with forethought, the result may be a comfortable home that retains the best features of the original home and augments them with personalized improvements. But if this methodology is taken to the extreme, the result may be not only uncomfortable but downright dangerous. Imagine remodeling a home so that it is part log cabin and part split-level ranch, with a dash of A-frame and a dollop of adobe hut thrown in for good measure. The structure would look strange, perhaps even silly, from both inside and outside. And it might just be structurally unsound, so that one day the whole thing comes crashing down. No one desires a house like this-yet some RPG enthusiasts have actually attempted to create and play within campaigns that are constructed in much the same fashion.

The GM is obliged to consider the desires of the players in his group. He must influence and direct these wants and needs to a great extent, but he must also be responsive. In addition to creative addition, modification, and special interpretation, the masterful game master will know if a change in the game system is called for, when it is needed, and how to accomplish the change.

Before that need occurs, the campaign certainly will have evolved to a sophisticated state. The milieu will be well developed and will cover those areas in which the players have evidenced the most interest. This could be detailed topographical maps; cultural and social data of complex and/or unusual nature; highly detailed urban maps with information on government, politics, and population; state armed forces and warfare between rival powers; webs of hidden influence and secret power groups; and so forth. These



and other special distinctions might appear singly or in combination. The existence of this sort of special information marks a mature and superior campaign.

Just as special features of the campaign milieu will have come to the fore, so, too, will the systems to handle play reflect the group's personality and preferences. The campaign might feature complex methods of combat and detailed methods for conducting such combat. Different methods of problem solving might be offered to the players through creation of new character classes or skills and abilities. Scenarios devised might require solving exceptionally difficult mental problems or entail elaborate role-playing. Time or probability travel might be introduced to mix genres and require players to operate their game personas in wildly differing historical periods or situations as diverse as fantasy and science fiction (the former a magic-dominated genre, the latter dominated by advanced science and technology).

In all cases, the game master will have developed the special features of the campaign and play within the campaign through interaction with and approval of the group. If such variations remove the group from the realm of other participants utilizing the same game system, this removal will be done by choice, not by chance. A game master of the expert sort will advise the group that following a certain line will lead them into a game campaign form that will not be compatible with the campaigns of other groups. The masterful GM will know how to mitigate this incompatibility so as to enable the group still to have normal contact and communication with other enthusiasts and not become an isolated or fringe element within the gaming community.

There are, of course, game systems that enjoy only very limited acceptance by the general community of RPG enthusiasts. This does not make such games bad or worthless. The small audience may indicate that the game system itself appeals only to some special interest group, or that the system has its basis in a genre that is not interesting to large numbers of people. It could be that the game is so complex and so demanding that only a few individuals are able to understand and appreciate it. Whatever the rea-

son, games with limited audiences are already in isolated circumstances with respect to each group that plays the game in question, and thus any significant alteration of the system will take the innovative group out of the mainstream. This must be a major consideration of game master and players before alterations of the campaign are made.

There are also “home grown,” very obscure rules systems that are pursued by a single group or by a handful of groups only. The game masters of such groups must display a rare sort of mastery indeed to bring their game choice into acceptance and their group into a position from which it can communicate with the general audience for role-playing game activity. Isolation tends to lead to entropy and attendant demise of RPG activity. Although there are millions of RPG enthusiasts in North America, the total still does not exceed two percent of the whole population at this time. Game masters and players alike need to be encouraging the pursuit and working collectively to ensure that the field grows and improves. The best of game masters perceive and support this view.

The mature campaign will sooner or later reach a state at which it is evident either that the group is eminently happy as it is and willing to continue thus for an indefinite time, or else that it has become sated and desires something different. The first phenomenon is easy enough to deal with. There are no new tricks to learn; only solid performance is necessary. The game master can certainly pat himself on the back if the players ask for nothing but more of the same. It is solid evidence of the mastery of the GM, if only in regard to the group. It is not to be treated as a small accomplishment!

But what about the other case? What is to be done when the players are restless? If you, as GM, have done virtually everything right, then it is a sign that the group, you included, needs a change of milieu, campaign, or game system. Perhaps alternating milieus with inclusion of the same PCs within each, and the variance of GMing brought thereby, will make the group satisfied. If not, perhaps you or one of the players should set to work creating a new campaign world to wipe out past errors and bring into play

all the new approaches used in the old milieu that were discussed as being desirable for a fresh start.

There is also the possibility of moving the campaign, or a newly created one, into a new game system. Such a step is not a last resort, but it is a big decision to make. When this decision is made, it must be with full knowledge and consent of the entire group (or a large majority at least). The GM's responsibility to respond to the needs of the whole group encompasses players and game master alike. Change of game system is a step that should be made only with consideration and planning. Because of the effort entailed in taking the campaign into a new game system, the change will not be easily reversed if the results are not as desirable from up close as they were when seen from a distance. The decision should be contemplated for a reasonable period of time; the results of the change should be anticipated and understood as much as possible beforehand. Although the game master must bear the brunt of the work in the transition, the player group will also have to change its characters and contribute to the new campaign. The players must therefore have time to consider and provide input to the whole effort as it begins and continues.

My own fantasy campaign has been changed three times. Once the Greyhawk campaign went from D&D to AD&D game rules. Then it was altered from a single-GM campaign to a dual-GM setup, in which another person assumed GM duties when I was unable to participate. Finally it was redeveloped to enable the management of diverse player groups over a long period of time and at erratic intervals while still allowing those members of the core player group to continue their various PCs within the whole. My reduced time for game mastering forced some of these changes, but time and change were also factors, for the campaign was initiated in 1973 and is still reasonably active to date. The last alteration, that of no longer aiming the campaign at a single player group, was forced by a set of altered personal circumstances that included relocation of some participants, resultant radical changes in the core group, and severe time restrictions. While some of the original group members moved to other campaigns

and one or two have developed their own campaigns, most have not been actively involved in RPG activity since the last alteration of my campaign because there is no home for them, no campaign to operate in.

This brings us to the point of changing the campaign. There are several ways to do it, and the change can be radical, gradual, or moderate. A radical change is the total abolition of the existing campaign and its basis. Let us use as an example an espionage game campaign that is ended and replaced by a science fantasy one. There will be disruption and some player loss, but if the changeover is the general desire of the GM and players, then the action is certainly justifiable. If you, as GM, determine that there is desire to make a radical change, and you are among the group wishing to alter the campaign genre so radically, then the move should be made as quickly and completely as possible.

Gradual alteration of the campaign can entail any of several approaches. The change can be from one system in the same genre to another. Such an alteration usually would be made by the gradual substitution of key rules, each substitution being made sequentially so as to facilitate learning the new game's methods and the system's mechanics. Gradual alteration often occurs through the creation of special rules developed by the group. The only drawback is that the group then becomes singular and isolated in most cases. Another method of gradual alteration is to introduce one or more other genres to the campaign, with special rules for modification of PCs and whatever other elements of the base game rules system as are no longer applicable to the new genre scenario used in the sessions that involve such play. For example, some playing groups have experimented with gradually introducing aspects of the science fantasy genre (typified by the Gamma World game) into a medieval fantasy campaign based on the AD&D game. It is certainly possible to have an enjoyable and satisfying experience through this sort of hybridization. However, such a method of gradual alteration is difficult for the GM, for he must know several other game systems and prepare the new rules. It is also demanding for the players, for they must handle a

diversity of new assumptions over a relatively short period of game play. Although the learning curve is steep, the benefits can be manifold.

An approach like this, if it systematically uses samplings of several genres, can yield information that is valuable in determining the new direction that the playing group will ultimately take.

The player group is allowed to experience play in other genres, and from each of these experiences the members can determine if they would actually enjoy long-term play in a campaign of that nature. The game master is likewise exposed to the needs of a campaign in each of the genres used and can make judgments as to his ability to manage each. In addition, all participants are broadened and given experience that will certainly make them better role-playing gamers.

A campaign that features shifting genres is likely to be superior if the effort is pulled off successfully, but the demands upon the GM are so great that most would be unable to cope with them on an ongoing basis. Also, players would find much the same problem. Those who could manage the whole would be likely to find themselves as a group of proverbial jacks-of-all-trades, masters of none. Very skilled participants, though, would certainly enjoy such a campaign and all would develop greater skills than are normally seen within even masterful groups of the single-genre sort.

Moderate alteration of the campaign is easy and painless but can be very damaging if it is not done correctly. This is due to the nature of the alterations and the singularity of the resulting campaigns. The alterations brought into play might actually make the campaign expression of the original base game a superior vehicle. That is, the game that was initially used to structure the campaign areas actually needs improvement, and the alterations are a means to this end. (This is as opposed to areas in which current vogue, a fad, or some aberration of the play group is quantified through inclusion of special rules.) Regardless of the merits of the moderate alterations imposed, they are very likely to cause the campaign to be singular, a nonesuch. No other groups, or at best a handful of others, will be using the same rules. The participants in such an altered campaign are isolated from the gaming community at

large, and this dooms their group to eventual extinction. Only if the alteration is used in a reasonably large segment of the participants utilizing the same genre(s) is there hope. Combination of two games in the same genre, for instance, might produce a new sort of game entity that is superior to either of the other two alone. The publishers of the two games used will resist such combination, of course, and it will be difficult, if not impossible, to bring the resulting improvement to the attention of the majority of participants in the two separate systems.

Frustrations of the sort that prompt people to alter games and campaigns sometimes cause individuals, usually game masters, to create new game systems. Marketing such new games is difficult and requires a lot of time and money. At best, such efforts bring into being small followings whose continued existence as playing groups hangs by a thread; if the “basement publisher” that produced the game goes out of business, the game will not spread much further, if at all, and the source of new ideas and accessory materials will dry up at the same time, since (presumably) the publisher of the game was the only individual interested in propagating and refining his system. Until and unless some means of increasing the size of the audience for a new RPG is actively pursued and additional vehicles for information and product dissemination are provided, the vast majority of these well-intentioned creative efforts are foredoomed to failure. Small-following **RPGs** are essentially isolated. They gradually stagnate or are brought down abruptly because game publication ceases, and the remnants slowly wither and fade into nothingness. To put it another way, nothing succeeds like success.

The most popular game systems are popular for a reason. They appeal to more people. They offer a greater degree of enjoyment to a broader participant base. This means that players will be easier to bring into campaigns. Just as important, it also means that the publisher of the game system will support the game (and its game masters and players) by publishing new information and playing material on a regular basis. All that assures fertile ground in which the campaign can flourish. It is a hard fact that the good game master cannot afford to ignore.

This does not mean that this work advocates basing campaigns on only those games that are popular. To put it bluntly, I of all people would never do so. When I introduced the D&D game in 1974, there were only a few campaigns going. In the first year, we sold only slightly over a thousand sets of rules. That was the first RPG, and we realized it would be a long struggle to assure the viability of the pioneer product. Game masters or players bent on creating and establishing their own RPG must be aware of the difficulties involved. There is an audience now, but there is also competition.

Change is one thing, but development is another. It requires an expert game master to manage a change in the campaign. This applies even to a moderate alteration. For radical change to be accomplished smoothly and without radical alteration in the play group, both master players and expert game master are needed. Interestingly, the masterful GM will typically utilize the gradual change, with moderate alterations in the campaign made permanent from time to time, so as to bring about radical change eventually. Although they are not normally acceptable, these changes are necessary under such conditions. This process builds the player group's level of skill to expert, perhaps master, status through experience, contribution, and programmed development. Because there are so many game systems, detailed discussion of the process is not possible. The quantity of unknowns is so great that even examples would be applicable to too small a segment to be particularly useful. The possible combinations of existing game systems, combined conglomerates, or new approaches would require several thick volumes to cover.

If the result of a campaign alteration is a new game, however, there is something concrete to say. Active dissemination of the new system should be undertaken as rapidly as possible. Players should be willing and able to begin their own campaigns and introduce new players to the game system. Use of the amateur press should be made. Professional journal publication would be helpful, of course, but in any event, care must be taken regarding trademark and copyright ownership. Exposure at enthusiast gatherings-club or association meetings as well as regional or

national conventions-is a must. With all that, rules must be available to the newly created participants in the system and some form of assistance offered to the game masters running campaigns based upon it. If all this activity is successful, and if the game is based on a genre that has strong popular appeal, there is some chance that it will survive beyond a year to two. If one in a hundred develop into commercially viable games, perhaps one in every ten of those have a life of more than a couple of years.

Well, say all the ambitious and creative **GMs** reading this, who cares about commercial success and long-term prospects? We are interested in providing the ultimate in role-playing games to our players. If it all ends in a year or two, that's a long time! Think of the enjoyment all of us will have in the meantime. Right on, say I! **The** reason for the existence of any RPG is to provide fun, and there is no guarantee that enjoyment will be gained over an ongoing period of longer than a year or two anyway, so go for it. When you do, though, be sure that you keep as many doors open as possible. If you and your fellow enthusiasts are bent on the creation of your own rules system, then here is what masterful folk should do to help assure the potential for long-term viability without sacrificing their own creativity and desire for the new game system.

There are many possible combinations of composition of the new game campaign, but they fall into four general groupings. The four categories are:

1. existing game modified by no more than 50 percent new rules material
2. more than 50 percent new systems utilizing an existing game as base
3. two or more existing games bridged by special rules
4. unique systems

Categories 1, 2, and 3 indicate that the group has some affinity for one or more existing **RPGs** but find it or them unsatisfying in important play areas. We understand that humans are social and that role-playing games are an expression of this. Your group is a social entity unto itself. The enjoyment of the campaign play and



the society of the members combine to bring more enjoyment than would be possible without these two elements. It is also understood that socialization outside the group, which combines one or both of the elements that bring enjoyment to the group, can bring additional enjoyment both while it occurs and afterward through some increased dynamism within the basic group. Therefore, it should be viewed as desirable to maintain the potential for maximum socialization outside the play group. This is accomplished by correspondence, publications, conventions, tournaments, and similar activities that bring enthusiasts into contact with others of like mind. To maintain maximum potential for the new game, it is desirable to retain contact with the participants in the existing game or games by keeping abreast of new developments specifically geared toward those games.

Modification of an existing RPG to suit the campaign group's desire leaves a good opportunity for continuing association with the base game. If the modifications are not too extensive (not more than 50% of the whole) or too radical (changing systems of rules, for instance, but retaining the body of information used to play), then the "renegade" group can keep in touch with the base game without undue difficulty. Typical areas of variance from the base game norm, such as character creation and the combat system, are the easiest to deal with in a way so as to allow the difference to remain without removing the campaign from the realm of the base game. To stay in touch with the base game while revising the character-creation system, for instance, all you need to do is keep a parallel record of PCs the way they would be described in the original system, and then keep your hand in the base game by occasionally playing those PCs in a nonvariant campaign. Whether a variant combat system is more detailed (likely) or less complicated (unlikely) than the original, it is a simple matter to keep sight of the original system by occasionally running non-variant combat situations.

Radical rule alterations are such that there is great difficulty retaining touch with the majority of role-playing gamers on a meaningful basis. Changes of more than 50 percent of the base game's systems are radical in this respect. However, the fact that

not all of the original system has been discarded indicates some remaining affinity for the original design. Although play within the original system will be difficult after becoming used to the radically altered game campaign, it is a good idea. That is, the group-GM and players alike-should periodically engage in play of the base system. This play should be fairly frequent-once a month at the least-and either as a group or with some other group or groups. Contact with the mainstream is thus maintained, and new ideas within the base system will be learned and understood in this manner. Such activity can only improve the level of mastery of all parties concerned. Additionally, it will help expose others to the variant systems, whether only through discussion or through play by invitation.

The **intermingling** of two or more game systems with bridging rules to accommodate the mixture is a fairly common occurrence. Considering the imaginative capacity of most RPG enthusiasts and their active mentalities, keen interest in two or more game genres is hardly surprising. The campaign that has a multigame basis is usually not in danger of becoming isolated, for the participants are likely to engage in play in any reasonably good campaign outside the group's own. There is some danger that the overworked GM will not have an opportunity to be as active outside the variant campaign as will his players. If you are such a game master, it is up to you to see that this doesn't happen. If you know such an individual, encourage him to remain active in the mainstream activities.

Only very experienced and solid play groups with mature individuals should pursue the play of unique systems, unless the group is certain that the new game will be accepted by other gamers as a basis for their campaigns. Experience is necessary to manage the difficulties that are sure to arise as weak areas and anomalies within the system become evident during play. "Solid" refers to the association and friendship within the group. Members must desire to meet and play regularly, and then must be friends, for they will have little or no contact with other role-playing gamers in most instances because their game campaign will isolate them. Finally, the group members should be mature, for if they are not,

change of residence, entrance into or graduation from college, new jobs, and marriage will soon cause the membership to dwindle. Recruiting new members will be difficult because of the unique nature of the game activity. In any event, it is urged that the group stay in contact with the gaming community through occasional play in other, standard campaigns.

The time has come. Your group is restless. Despite the excellent nature of the game upon which you based your campaign and the efforts put forth to assure challenge and excitement, the players have been active in the campaign for three years (let's say), and they are desirous of something new. They look to you as their GM to assist them in their quest. As a master, you will not only facilitate the group's expressed desire but you will seek to do so in a manner that assists everyone in continuing his enjoyable pursuit while remaining within the gaming community and continuing to progress toward mastery. How do you manage all that? As a game master, such demands should be second nature and accomplished with a minimum of difficulty. Of course, the group is composed of individuals, and there are as many opinions as there are members, yourself included. Although you have the advantage of being the one who must do the initial work, you are aware that the result must be accepted by the balance of the group or else players will desert the campaign. Therefore, you consider the four major methods of developing a new, nonstandard campaign. Obviously, modification of the campaign won't do for the long term, and using it as a base with essentially new systems is also likely to bring dissatisfaction. Were this not the case, the campaign change would not be desired by the group. You know the problems inherent in a whole new game system. The logical course, then, is to bring several game systems with a diversity of genres into play by bridging rules.

There will be some concurrence regarding the new genres desired. For the sake of this exposition, let's assume there are two subgroups with diverse wishes. One wishes to move the campaign from its base system genre, science fiction, into that of horror and the occult. The other is desirous of utilizing the postholocaust genre to provide the play vehicle. How can both be accommo-

dated? The answer is to retain the base system. Bring in a new factor, let's say time travel in this case. The PCs (not the associated assistants or lesser PCs of the same players) are recruited by the time travel authority to serve as agents. Bridging rules for the characters to match the new base systems' specifications are devised. Rules for certain limited equipment carried from one genre to the other are likewise prepared. An episode or saga is devised for each of the new games, and the whole campaign has been altered without loss of anything. . . except sleep for the GM who must be responsible for the work needed to bring it all about. To counter the demands, the masterful game master might have the player who supported the new genres most vocally become the arbiter for play within the system in question, while reserving as his domain the overall campaign and possibly a **subgenre** as well.

The blessing of role-playing games is that each campaign can be molded and shaped to suit the aims and preferences of a particular group. In fact, each campaign is by its nature distinctly different from all others, even those predicated on the same set of rules. But too much of a good thing- in this case, an overdose of alterations heaped on the rule framework-can destroy all the work that the author of the game and the GM of the campaign have put in. Before a GM can know how much reconstruction his campaign can stand, he must understand and appreciate the basic structure of the game he is using. Which parts of the construction cry out for reinforcement? Which ones are fine just as they are? Which ones can be replaced without destroying the whole? If a remodeler rips all the beams out of a wall before shoring up the ceiling, he's asking for trouble. Likewise, a GM who tears out the underpinnings of a game system without realizing how many other things that structure is supporting will wind up with a mess that may not be able to be repaired. But a GM who proceeds with his remodeling in deliberate fashion, with a goal in mind and a plan at hand, stands a good chance of constructing a "house" that is the envy of the entire RPG neighborhood.



# Chapter 6



## SEARCHING AND RESEARCHING

**N**ow that you know the elements that make up role-playing game rules in general, and what can happen if too many liberties are taken with mixing and matching rules from different games, it's time to get down to specifics-specific genres, that is. (The genres of specific games are included in Appendix D.) In the first part of this chapter, each of the significant different types of **RPGs** is described, both in terms of basic nature and on a comparative basis, delineating which features and concepts are present in some types and subtypes but absent in others. Later in this chapter, you will learn about the need to have or develop a strong background in the genre of your game of choice; some types of games demand less of the GM and the players in this regard than others, and the amount of background required may be a factor in the game you choose. If you are contemplating purchasing and learning a role-playing game for the first time, or if you are or might be considering switching from one type of game to another, the information here (combined with what you may already know about each of the genres) will help you make an informed decision on which type of game to obtain.

## THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF GAMES

*Fantasy* is at once the umbrella term that covers all role-playing games and one of the genres under that umbrella. All RPGs are fantastic in the sense that they depict game worlds, not real ones. But for our purposes here, the term refers to a type of game in which the natural laws governing our real world do not all apply or are supplemented by other laws that, as far as we know, are not part of our reality. The most popular fantasy RPGs are the *Dungeons & Dragons* game and the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* game. In games such as these, magic works; the heroes and deities of legend and mythology are actual personages; people are capable of mental and physical feats that are unheard of or, at best, very rare in the world we live in. At least one of these three elements is present in a fantasy RPG, and all three may appear in some combination.

Some fantasy games deal with amalgamations of legendary material and mythical stuff created by various and sundry writers. Others specialize, dealing only with “worlds” of the sort created by the game designer or the author of a work of fiction from which the game is drawn. At the opposite end of the fantasy spectrum from the wide-scope games (typified by the D&D game) are those games based solely upon a specific aspect of the myth of our Earth, be it Arthurian legend or Norse saga.

*Science fantasy* and *science fiction* games are related to the true fantasy role-playing game, the former more closely than the latter. *Science fantasy* games are based on advances and changes in science or evolution that are useful for the game, not necessarily probable. In discussing these games, the emphasis must be put on “fantasy,” not on “science.” For example, player characters may be able to project mental powers such as telepathy, teleportation, and telekinesis (which is sometimes an aspect of a true fantasy game as well). The game system may also include mutations of flora and fauna, some of which could have mental as well as physical powers. The setting can be a form of “alternate Earth,” or perhaps an alien world where such strange creatures and

powers occur naturally. Whether or not magic per se is included, the game system is “magical” in its approach. Typical science fantasy games include Judge Dredd and Psi World.

On the other hand, in a *science fiction* role-playing game, the emphasis *is* on science. Such games pay far more attention to scientific fact or extrapolation from scientific fact as the basis for their designs. The genre is broad and the number of talented authors writing its literature is large. Players of science fiction **RPGs** can draw from science fiction novels as well as good television and film offerings, some of which are based on these novels. Acceptance of science fiction as an entertainment form means that such games are quite popular.

The general category of science fiction (SF) role-playing games is divided into three subcategories. First is the *pure* SF game, typified by the Star Frontiers game and Traveller. This sort of design deals with space travel, futuristic technology and tactics in warfare, exploration of alien planets, and the social and governmental forms that might evolve on Earth or in an Earthlike environment in the next few centuries. In fantasy and science fantasy games, players take roles such as warriors, wizards, barbarians, mutants, or adventurers endowed with special mental powers. In a pure SF game, the typical character played is a spaceship pilot, an interplanetary explorer, a mercenary soldier, or a special intelligence agent. In a campaign in a pure SF game, players might encounter strange life forms that bear some resemblance to creatures of myth or make-believe, but space drives, sonic blasters, interstellar trading, and alien relations are the stuff of which the game is really made.

The second subdivision of the science fiction category deals with the more immediate future, in a form generally referred to as the *postholocaust* SF game. The Gamma World game is a good example of this subgenre. These games mix the “fact” of widespread or worldwide destruction (such as would occur in a nuclear war) with slightly advanced or altered technology. The result can be a setting such as that of the movie *The Road Warrior*, which takes place in a part of the world that was not hit by very many, or any, bombs. Or the game can revolve around characters’

attempts to survive and prosper in a place where bombs were dropped.

The third category of science fiction games, which leads full circle back to the fantasy role-playing game, is what might be called the **horror** genre, or the “unearthly” SF game, predicated on past or present confrontations with aliens who live on or in or can come to Earth. One of the most popular games in this genre is Call of Cthulhu. The element of SF in these games is mixed well with horror to blend chilling struggles against ghastly aliens and their earthly servants. Such authors as H. P. Lovecraft, Algernon Blackwood, and Clark Ashton Smith represent the fountainhead of the literature from which this type of role gaming has sprung. To their concepts are married legendary materials such as vampires and ghosts. Likewise, a sprinkling of the stuff typical of 1930s pulp fiction—master criminals, occult powers, and fiendish plots woven by villains with strange scientific equipment or mental abilities—can be tossed in to give the design a broader area of appeal and action.

If the subject matter just related describes a circle from fantasy through science fantasy to science fiction and back again, it by no means covers the entire field of role-playing games. Above the entire circle just described (or, some would say, beneath it) lies the milieu of comic book superheroes. Two very popular *superhero* games, the Marvel Super Heroes game and the DC Heroes game, supply participants with actual characters drawn from the two major comic lines, Marvel and DC. Others, such as Champions, enable the players to develop their own special fantastic creations to do battle and adventure in worlds inhabited by the likes of Superman, The Hulk, Spider-Man, Wonder Woman, and so forth. Quite naturally, robotic heroes are an extension of such games.

*Time travel* is one aspect of play that may be present in all fantasy and science fiction **RPGs**, including those based on comic books. Beyond the obvious, however, such potential is either implied or included in these **RPGs**. While sometimes included in fantasy, time travel is the subject of much science fiction. It ranges from delving into the past to future expeditions. Timemaster is one game that uses time travel as its central theme. Specialized



gaming utilizing this type of play must have a group, usually an agency of some sort, protecting time from the manipulations of evil or well-meaning but mistaken individuals. Because of the scope of the concept of time travel, and the unknown future, such play certainly could cover all the many facets of the hobby, except perhaps for the true fantasy RPG.

Heading off in a different direction altogether are the **RPGs** based on actual history or the real present. Espionage is quite a popular topic for games of this sort. Two popular products in this genre are the Top Secret game and the James Bond 007 game. Considering the success of James Bond in both print and film media, the popularity of espionage games is logical. However, since a role-playing game involves a group having adventures together, singling out a particular hero is not sufficient. Every player desires to be a hero, and obviously all cannot be an agent named James Bond, for example. In role-playing games, heroes are created by players, not played by casual partakers of singular adventure scenarios, if the design is to be long-lived and enjoy continuing popularity.

Allied to espionage designs are the ***detective*** role-playing products. Many diversions of this sort are sold as simple scenarios intended for one-time-only usage-party games in which the guests each take the role of a character in the scenario. A crime has been perpetrated, and through questioning and reasoning, each of the participants tries to determine who the criminal is, while the evildoer (if he or she is one of the characters in the scenario) tries to keep his true nature secret by giving out information designed to throw the others off the track. Although games of this sort are currently very popular and can be an enjoyable way to spend an evening, they do not qualify as true role-playing games, since the activity is not ongoing and they are based on role assumption, not role-playing.

Other detective games, though, such as Mercenaries, Spies & Private Eyes, are true role-playing games that enable participants to create and develop a game milieu and ongoing characters who engage in adventurous activity over a large number of cases, à la

Sherlock Holmes and Mike Hammer. From the standpoint of group activity, many of these games have the same problem as an espionage game that features a specific hero. Action in this genre often consists of happenings involving a single hero, a protagonist and an assistant, or more rarely a pair of heroes. Gaming groups are more often composed of six rather than three **participants**—thus, usually there are not enough “choice” characters to go around.

The settings for espionage and detective **RPGs** range from the early Victorian era to modern times (and beyond). Since spies were around before there were private detectives, **RPGs** based on such activity can go far back into history. To my knowledge, the only ones commercially available don’t go back much further than a century, but that can change at any moment.

*Historical* role-playing games are those designed to simulate what life was like in some past era. As has been pointed out before, some espionage and detective games can also be labeled historical games if they take place at a time previous to the present day. One popular type of historical game, closely related to espionage and detective games, is the sort that is played out during the Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression, that is, the period from 1920 to about 1937. The *Gangbusters* game is a good example of this form. Such **RPGs** typically offer action and adventure to participants playing as gangsters or law-enforcement agents or both. The latter, by the way, does not mean that some participants only have roles as criminals or law-enforcement characters. Ongoing games in this genre are often more enjoyable if each player has a game persona in both camps, as it were.

The American West of the post-Civil War period has been the subject of two historical games with which I am familiar, the *Boot Hill* game and *Wild West*. Participants become ranchers, drifters, cowboys, miners, gunmen, Indians, and other character types of the Old West. If you’re interested in reliving the exploits of a swashbuckler in the time of the Three Musketeers, you can play *Flashing Blades*. If you want to experience the life of a privateer on the high seas, try *Privateers and Gentlemen*. Those are only some

examples of historical role-playing games; many other subjects and past eras are covered, and more will be covered in the years to come as new games are developed and marketed.

The number of periods covered by role-playing games is broad, and at any given time, there is no way to state absolutely which subjects are being offered. What has been offered, what is currently available, and what will be sold next year present widely varying lists, anchored by a few stable items. The ever-changing variety offered in the field is due to two things. First, consumer demand changes as players tire of one subject and decide to shift to another. This is a meaningful shift whenever it occurs because most subjects dealt with in **RPGs** have very small audiences (a few thousand each). Second, there are quite a few very small publishers in the field. Some of these “cottage industries” will publish a game or two and then disappear, affecting the lists of games and subjects only for as long as the companies remain viable.

Probably the best way of finding out the available games is to contact game publishers for their catalogs, send away for catalogs offered by the big mail-order firms in hobby gaming, and go to a game store or “hard core” hobby shop and check things out with the people there. You should know the extent of what is offered. It is part of being involved in the hobby.

Perhaps other games or adjunctive materials will be useful additions to your own field. Miniature figurines and **scenics** are quite an addition for those who desire spectacle. The dimension and perspective these accessories bring to a role-playing game are often enthusiastically received by participants. Whether you are the game master or one of the players of a game, you should know what is being offered in the varied lines of the products that serve the needs of gaming enthusiasts.

Role-playing games are supplemented by quite a selection of professional and amateur periodicals. There are associations of dedicated enthusiasts. There are regular conventions held in various parts of the country. To be aware of these products and services is to become more involved and more skilled in your hobby. (Listings of national associations and regional groups, conventions, and periodicals are contained in appendices A, B,

and C.) The magazines offer information in the form of articles, letters, news, and game scenarios. Their advertising alone is a service, for it keeps one aware of the latest materials available. Associations enable the exchange of ideas and competitive play opportunities for the truly dedicated gamer. Conventions enable personal interaction with gamers from all over the city, state, or continent, opportunities to see new products, a chance to play some new games, and so on. Each of these things-periodicals, associations, conventions-takes you out of the vacuum of **small-group** activity or community isolation.

One would not claim to be an expert traveler, for instance, on the basis of having read many books on the subject and always having watched "National Geographic Explorer" on television. These activities may be evidence of a great interest in travel, but they are not themselves sufficient to warrant a claim of expertise in the field. When the enthusiast's library is expanded and cultural, social, and ecological material is added to his background, a truly serious interest can be acknowledged. The interest can be even further explored and indulged through the viewing of travelogues and the collections of maps, photographs, and souvenir materials. However, without the firsthand experience of actual travel by airplane, ship, railway, boat, auto, and all other means, the individual professing to be an expert traveler would be perpetuating a pretense. Imposture might be fun to read about, but it is hardly useful to the role game enthusiast outside actual play.

To be an expert, it is necessary to know the whole gamut of gaming thoroughly. If you are to become a master of role-playing, you must know the field of games and associated products and services. You must know the active groups. You must keep abreast of current ideas and trends. A collection of material is necessary. Then you can move into role-playing and practice imposture through your game persona.

## KNOWING THE WORLD OF YOUR PC

The analogy about world travel used before was selected purposely. As a participant in a role-playing game campaign, you must be an expert on the world in which your game persona lives and has adventures. Perhaps you began playing in an RPG because you always enjoyed the subject background of the game, whether it is fantasy, science fiction, or historical. On the other hand, you simply may have been introduced to a particular game accidentally, finding the concept of role-playing fascinating rather than the background basis of the game. In either case, to hope to achieve mastery, you must be caught up in role gaming sufficiently to have a strong desire to excel.

To illustrate the depth needed to establish oneself as an expert in the milieu chosen, consider the following example. In the **mid-1960s**, a group of ambitious students at Stanford University undertook a project that mixed the international simulation concept with board games of the conflict simulation sort, and with a bit of military miniatures. As I recall, it was labeled The Ad Hoc Committee for the Reconstruction of WWII—a massive, fairly chaotic effort using the energies of several people plus computer assistance. I participated in the role of the Chinese Communist commander. My good friend and the co-founder of TSR, Inc., Don Kaye, was (naturally) the Chinese Nationalist commander.

Wading boldly into the chaos, not aware of exactly what I needed to know but wanting to leave no source untapped, I proceeded to acquire books on the history, culture, agriculture, politics, and literature of China. I needed to know these things to understand the people and the politics of China. Of course, I bought maps, military histories, and even writings of Chairman Mao—the person I played in the game. At the same time, I tried to learn about the economy and who and what the so-called Nationalists, my opponents, were and their resources in thinking, manpower, weapons, and what have you.

Some two months later, after all the participants had mailed off

their extremely lengthy strategic work sheets but before any tactical moves had been submitted, the whole effort collapsed under its own weight. Apparently there was simply too much for the “game masters” at Stanford to keep track of, and they didn’t appreciate the scope of what they were trying to do until most or all of the participants had invested a lot of time in research and preparation. I profited from the knowledge I gained, but there was scarcely any gaming fun at all.

Fortunately, role-playing game campaigns are not by their nature subject to this form of internal breakdown. The great majority of role-playing games do not attempt to simulate precisely some certain aspect of reality or history, unlike the abortive World War II simulation, so when you set about an in-depth study of your milieu, you won’t be subject to the same hazard.

Complete immersion in the make-believe world actually requires a fair amount of real knowledge. Even as whimsical a milieu as the fantasy world requires a firm background knowledge of many subjects. After all, fantasy games are based on a mixture of reality (actual or imagined) and myth. Even fairy tales that deal with giants, dragons, magicians, wicked witches, and enchantments also contain people, dwellings, and interpersonal dealings drawn from society at that time. In this light, you will understand why I recommend the reading of works such as ***A History of the Art of War in the Middle Ages***, ***Town Government in the Sixteenth Century***, ***The Domesday Book***, ***The Welsh Wars of Edward II***, and ***Numbers in History***. Armor, weapons, fortification, siegecraft, costume, agriculture, politics, heraldry, and warfare are the meat and drink of a serious participant in a game such as Dungeons & Dragons. The same applies, with some few differences, to any milieu considered.

A game involving the work of a single author might seem to be an exception. After all, couldn’t one simply become intimately familiar with the author’s works and thus have a masterful background for gaming? The answer is no. The author of the work has a broad background, and from this knowledge and his imagination created the work. Then an RPG was designed from a com-

bination of the author's material and the game creator's effort. So it is also important to know and use the material the game designer utilized.

The primary source for campaign detail is, of course, the game itself. The secondary sources are the author's work and whatever else the game designer utilized in creating the role game. Beyond those, we have tertiary sources-works that the author was influenced by and used in his writing, and other material the game designer used. The pyramid gets broader as we go deeper; in some cases, a really energetic student of a game based on a single author's work may benefit from examining the works that influenced the author's and designer's sources, and so on.

For example, one company has produced a role-playing game based on the writings of J. R. R. Tolkien, specifically his books and stories set in the fantastic land of Middle Earth. The primary source material for the game master is the game itself. Beyond that, a game master who aspires to an intimate knowledge of this milieu should read the author's works and keep them on hand for reference. He should also learn about Tolkien by reading biographical or autobiographical information, to determine which literature, myths, and legends influenced the author's creation of his fantasy world, and then peruse Tolkien's source material. Likewise, the game master should examine previously published role-playing games and compare them with the game in question to ascertain which things influenced the designer and how the designer interpreted and presented these concepts in his own game. This need not be the end of the information-gathering process, for as noted, the quest can go on indefinitely, but this much work ought to give any student a solid and sizable background.

In science fiction, we seem to run into another exception. However, it is again a case of delving into subject areas from which the author of the work drew information. In addition, a broad background of material in the genre, specifically in that portion of SF in which the author in question wrote the work, enables the game participant to excel. Furthermore, if the author is of real substance and his work has been around for some time, it is a safe bet that there will be associated works to draw upon.

These associated works will be influenced by and at least peripherally touch on the same material as the original author did. How many readers of H. P. Lovecraft have read *The Willows*? *The King in Yellow*? While most are probably familiar with *The Hounds of Tindalos*, only the devoted few will have managed to find and read the two former works. Time to go back to your *Necronomicon* for all the rest of you!

Because so much is required in regard to developing a background with both breadth and depth, it is quite unlikely that you can accomplish this in the near future- but don't throw up your hands and surrender. Most of the reading and study is fun. All of it is informative, from mythology to metaphysics, philosophy to psychology to physics. Meanwhile you still get to enjoy playing the game or games of your choice. Developing a knowledge pool that will make you a master at role-game play is not something you do right away and all at once. You do it gradually, as enjoyment, as education, when you have leisure time that is not otherwise occupied. Read books on the subject when you read. Watch television programs that have application. Whether they are based on fantasy, history, or fiction of the possible future, all RPGs consider whole worlds. Knowledge of the real world is used to design all such games, and thus it is valuable in any game milieu.

As an aside, I wish to assure readers that many a nature program on television has given rise to new and more terrible creatures for inclusion in the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons game. Most recently I saw something on the cone-shell snail, a marine creature of a most horrible sort. Notes are now on file for its possible inclusion in a supplement to the game one day.

For those who are students, remember this: Most of what you are learning now applies not only to some aspect of your present and future life, but it is also fuel for your gaming! English allows communication, for example. Knowing it well means you can understand and be understood better. Every subject has its value-in life and in games too. Don't waste any learning time. The opportunity passes all too quickly. Save other pursuits for other times, and use class time wisely. It will build your enjoyment



of life later on, as you learn to apply the new material to your gaming. It works.

Consider two other works. One is the Boy *Scout* Handbook. The other is the Army *Survival* Manual. If you were actually to perform or experience everything contained within the pages of these two books, you would be well on your way to becoming a true explorer. In real terms, you would be self-sufficient under extreme conditions; you would be able to survive, or at least to survive more easily and more comfortably, by using your knowledge. In game terms, you could use this same knowledge to enable your character(s) to function and survive under adverse physical conditions in the majority of the make-believe worlds of adventure. Since these make-believe worlds, by and large, are actually based on Earth or at least on an Earthlike environment, your **real-world** knowledge is transferable. You (and your characters) will know how to determine direction and thus, it is hoped, keep from getting lost. You will know how to perform basic first aid, which could save the life of a character in dire straits. And the list goes on . . . Coupled with what you know now and what you will learn in the future, how much broader is your knowledge base? How much greater your self-sufficiency level in other conditions? While there is no method of actually learning magic and there are no starships to pilot (yet!), much of what lies between can be known.

What is needed is a program of expanding your learning with regard to the game world you have selected to adventure in. The program you establish will be entirely self-imposed and **self-directed**. It must fit your available time and cannot go beyond the limits of materials you can obtain. It can be as limited or as expansive as you decide, but unless you commit yourself to staying with it, you will never truly master your role gaming.

In order to assist you in the undertaking, an outline of activity follows, using the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons game as an example of a general fantasy RPG and the James Bond 007 game as an example of a game specifically drawn from one author's works. This outline is, of course, only a suggestion, for actual pursuit requirements will vary according to the RPG you have chosen to master.

### Outline of Study for Mastery

- I. Acquisition and perusal of primary source material of the game milieu

Example 1. Because of the broad general background upon which the AD&D game was based, this activity would cover familiarization with the entire set of books that are the game system—at the least, the *Dungeon Masters Guide*, *the Players Handbook*, and one or more of the compendiums of monsters (*Monster Manual*, *Monster Manual II*, *Fiend Folio* tome). Other sources that might be used, depending on the amount of detail and the type of game milieu desired, include the *Legends 6 Lore* book, *Dungeoneer's Survival Guide*, *Wilderness Survival Guide*, and *Oriental Adventures*.

Example 2. For the 007 game, this would mean the acquisition and perusal of the basic game system plus the accessory materials, including the *Q Manual* and the various adventures designed for the system (*Ocotopussy*, *Goldfinger*, etc.).

- II. Acquisition of closely related materials

Example 1. For AD&D gaming, this includes both acquisition of at least some of the works listed in the Inspirational & Educational Reading Appendix of the AD&D *Dungeon Masters Guide*, plus the acquisition and study of another fantasy role-playing game in the genre.

Example 2. For the 007 game, the aspiring expert would read all the James Bond books written by Ian Fleming and would likewise get a copy of a similar game (such as the Top Secret game). Beyond this, helpful information can be found in books and articles about Fleming's works; in factual accounts about spies and espionage; and in other novels in the espionage genre.

III. Immersion in the hard core of adventure gaming

- A. subscribing to at least one professional magazine
- B. joining a national association of role gamers
- C. attending one or more conventions devoted to the hobby of game playing in general and **RPGs** in particular
- D. optionally, joining an active local club and/or subscribing to at least one amateur magazine

IV. Determination to use leisure-time activities to broaden your base of understanding of **RPGs** and the particular milieu you have chosen to specialize in

- A. use of reading opportunities
- B. acquisition of printed material (fiction, history, maps, etc.)
- C. viewing related television programs
- D. selecting and viewing related films
- E. using any other sources
  - 1. travel
  - 2. museums
  - 3. information from experts

V. Development of a research collection

- A. collection of printed materials
  - 1. books and pamphlets
  - 2. periodicals
  - 3. maps
  - 4. games
- B. collection of all manner of other associated materials

Mastering role-playing is a long-term undertaking. Any such effort, however, cannot help but make you a broader and more knowledgeable individual; so the game, as they say, is well worth the candle. The library and collection of materials you acquire

over the course of time will have its own intrinsic value. You will have benefited from the study of it. And should the time come when you no longer desire to possess part or all of the material, you will find that there is a collector value in many items. (The last I heard, the offer price for ***Dragon*** magazine #1 was as high as \$200.)

The path to role-playing mastery begins with searching and researching. First you must search within yourself and examine the field of available RPGs, to determine which genre or genres to concentrate on. Then you must research-find out all you can about the area(s) you want to explore. Knowledge is the key, and your knowledge of a genre and its attendant background material must be so deep and so broad that you feel at home within that genre, just as much as you feel at home in the world in which all of us actually live. In this case, familiarity does not breed contempt but quite the opposite: familiarity leads to fun and fulfillment, and both of those benefits will be yours in full measure if you immerse yourself in the role-playing game hobby and take advantage of all it has to offer.



# Chapter 7



## TACTICAL MASTERY

**K**nowing the game system and its specific rules gives the master player insight into the strategy of the game. This knowledge also allows the player to devise a grand tactical plan for the success and advancement of his character. Strategy and grand tactics vary from game to game, of course. In fact, there is even greater variance in tactical play. As games differ and player/PC approaches differ, so, too, does each and every scenario played. If the same scenario, in text form, is presented to two identical groups of PCs, the fact remains that the players behind those PCs will be different and will have their own singular approaches to the problems and challenges posed by the scenario. One approach is not necessarily better or worse than the other; all that can be said is that they are different, and the methods that each group of players use might indeed both lead to success.

Not only do scenarios differ when they are played from group to group, but even the most popular of these published game aids has only limited acceptance. Perhaps twenty-five percent of the audience of a given RPG will serve as GM or player in a scenario of outstanding repute. The others pass by one published scenario in

favor of another, or make up their own. How, then, can one attain tactical mastery?

Experience is the best teacher-a cliché, to be sure, but a cliché precisely because it is true. There is also a truism that applies particularly with regard to becoming a master tactician of role-playing games: You know yourself and what you do better than I, or anyone else, ever could. So one can speak in general terms of tactical expertise. The game you play is specific. has its own rules, and is certainly unique. Each game campaign-each scenario within the campaign-is different and so, too, are the tactics that apply. Within each game's rules are provided, implicitly or explicitly, varying approaches to play. For instance, whether PCs are defined by classes or by skills, this variation is a specific aspect that must be considered when trying to define proper tactics.

The multiplicity of games, possible campaigns, and possible scenarios is compounded by the fact that any RPG activity is engaged in by a group of players and PCs. Characters within a given PC group are unique. Variables such as the number of PCs in a group, each character's attributes, and the class or skills attached to each PC make it a virtual impossibility to treat tactics on a specific level. Describing how to succeed at a role-playing game on the tactical level is much like trying to describe the "best" route to take when driving from Los Angeles to New York without knowing what type of vehicle is being used, how much fuel the vehicle consumes, what time of year it is, or any other fundamental facts that bear critically upon the definition of "best" in any certain case.

If assumptions as to the game, number of PCs, classes/skills, and the scenario to be played are made, then a discussion of tactics applicable to that set of known quantities is possible. The problem is, unless many major game systems are dealt with in this fashion-and there are a wide number of hypothetical PC groups placed within a broad sampling of scenarios designed for each of the games treated- the lessons learned from the exercise will be of little use. Even given such an extensive treatment, most readers would find that at best, only a fraction of the material presented would be of any use to them. Simply put, role-playing games are

too scenario-specific themselves to make even a treatise pertinent to a single game system of use to anyone except a novice.

Only the most general material, then: can apply to *all* players in *all* major game systems. Given this, can a vague treatment of tactics be considered useful? Yes. Consider this: A specific treatment of the tactical skills of play would have to be specific as to game, characters, and scenario, just as was described. Worse still, the scenario-specific advice would have to deal with information and data that would never be known to the players until after completion of the scenario, if even then. Instead of taking this approach: the advice here will generalize as to masterful tactics, but then we will narrow the focus somewhat and do something that will be more specific but still generally applicable.

There are tactical actions that any PC can follow in any game and scenario that will help assure success. These are described on the following pages. Once those have been covered, we will discuss how a scenario is constructed. This specific general knowledge will enable the serious player to become a master of the tactics of his chosen RPG system, providing he assiduously applies his knowledge in a thoughtful and reasoned way.

## TACTICAL MASTERY TIPS

Know the mission. Based on the information you are given in the background and setting of a scenario, define exactly what you are going to try to do. Sometimes the mission will be spelled out in no uncertain terms; if it is not, you should be able to deduce it logically from the information provided. Keep the mission in mind at all times, so that each activity you engage in assists in the overall aim.

Know the **goal**. The mission should have a set goal. When that goal is successfully achieved or arrived at, the mission is complete and the adventure should conclude at that point. The distinction between “mission” and “goal” may not always seem clear-cut, but the distinction is there nonetheless. The mission is a description of what must be done to achieve success; the goal is an enumeration

of the condition(s) that will prevail when the mission is complete. For instance, the mission of a lawman is to apprehend and detain a suspected criminal; the goal of that mission is attained when the quarry is safely behind bars.

Define the objectives. The mission and goal, once defined and analyzed, will contain distinct places where progress can be measured. Each such objective should take you one step closer to attainment of the goal and completion of the mission. At times, however, the reaching of an objective does not lead directly toward the next objective. After reaching an objective, examine your remaining resources. If you have incurred losses so great as to make further objectives probably unattainable, then break off the mission for the time being. Run away that day, reequip, and return to the mission when you are back at full strength. In our example, one of the lawman's first objectives would be to find the trail of the criminal he is seeking; then he must catch up with and force an encounter with his quarry. and so forth.

Make, and follow, a plan. When the mission is understood, the goal is clear to all, and objectives have been set, then it is time to devise a plan that takes into account all members of the PC group and how they will communicate and operate together. Have each team member understand his assignment. Assess strengths and weaknesses. Know all the resources available. The plan is to be adhered to at all times when it appears to have a chance of success-or less chance of failure than some other plan. In the plan should be recognition signals, a rendezvous point in case the team should become separated, and even some cover story to explain your presence/activity in the area where the scenario takes place.

**Maintain** the tempo. Keep moving. Press toward the goal. Time is often the ally of the opponents, so allow as little as possible to be wasted.

Operate as a unit. The characters involved in an adventure must cooperate to achieve their goal and successfully complete the



mission. Utilize each character's strength and cover everyone's weaknesses as a group entity. Separated, fingers are vulnerable. In a tightly closed form, they become a fist.

Use your sense. . . Use your common sense at all times. Usually it will be the best method for average problem solving.

... and your character's senses. Your character has them-use them! How? You have to stay in constant contact with the GM in this regard. When your PC is in any situation in which information is lacking- entering an unknown area, for example-address the GM and assume a mode such as this: "I'm looking up, down, all around. What do I see? Can I **hear** anything? What do I smell? Do I sense or **feel** anything unusual?"

Record, refer, and remember. Keep track of your resources. This means weapons, devices, and anything else useful. (Team members are resources, too, of course, but that utilization has already been dealt with.) Use this information as reference material when you're trying to determine a course of action. Additionally, record information as to where you've been, where you are now, and where you're going. Note anything unusual in this regard. When actual record-keeping would be cumbersome or time consuming, make a conscious effort to remember what you have come across so that you will recognize it if you see it again.

Scout the enemy. Take the time and make the effort to get to know your opponents as fully as possible. This knowledge will enable the most efficient handling of such opposition with a minimum expenditure of time and other resources in overcoming whatever stands between you and your goal. In the example used earlier, the lawman's search for the criminal will go more quickly if he takes the time to question townspeople and find out that the wrongdoer has a cohort waiting for him in the town to the east. With that one piece of information, the lawman finds out two important things: the criminal's destination, and the fact that he (the lawman) will

probably have to face two opponents instead of just one when he arrives at the same place.

Be consistent. Strategy and grand tactics will often dictate unique methods of handling familiar problems, because the opponents will be surprised by such methodology. Small-scale tactical applications, on the other hand, call for a high degree of consistency. Think of how one gets through a maze. By placing one hand, let us say the left, on the wall of a maze and always keeping it on a wall, one will eventually complete the entire path between entrance and exit. In similar fashion, if you are exploring, take a direction that seems promising and follow it. If you are unable to continue in that direction, have a second choice. Thus, for instance, if one moves always north and west, to return to a place previously passed, one need only move south and east.

Evade and avoid. Whenever possible, conserve time and other resources by avoiding unnecessary confrontation. Slip away without fighting, negotiate, or use trickery: The goal of the mission is paramount, and only those activities that will lend probable success to attaining that goal should be undertaken.

Don't be afraid to improvise. At times: the plan cannot be followed. Improvise a new set of short-term plans immediately. Again, at times, resources will not be sufficient to complete the mission. Improvise! Perhaps materials and/or friendly individuals at hand can be utilized. When you are improvising, keep your goal and objectives in mind. In our example of the lawman and the criminal, let us suppose that the lawman arrives at the town and finds the cohort (without revealing his own true identity, of course,, but discovers that the man he's after is nowhere to be seen. Was the lawman's original information incorrect? Has he somehow arrived at the destination before his quarry got there? Should he bide his time or resume his search in a different locale? The lawman must improvise because things haven't gone the way he expected them to, but no matter what he decides to do at this juncture, he should always keep sight of his mission and his goal.

There are other such tactical bits that could be dealt with if we broke things down to very specific generalities, but the foregoing actually embody the truly important tactics that need to be remembered and followed to gain tactical mastery. You identify your mission, set your goal, determine your objectives, get to know- the enemy, and plan with your team. You use every sense and resource to move swiftly from objective to objective in order to attain your goal. You are not sidetracked, but you go out of your way to bypass obstacles and enemy strongpoints whenever possible. You conserve your resources. When you strike, you do so hard and fast, but with only the amount of force necessary to accomplish your aim. There's no sense hitting a fly with a baseball bat, after all. If need be, your team will retire in order to reequip, but you'll be back again. In fact, when you return, you'll know the challenges of the opposition better and will handle them more efficiently. You adventure as lightly equipped as possible for the mission, but each plan calls for different items. Sometimes the retiring and reequipping is because of a need for changing the plan and using different items to reach your goal.

X11 these tactical definitions, these tips on being successful in operational activity in your chosen role-playing game, are well and good. Still, with missions, plans, goals, objectives, and all the rest, you must be wondering about a frame of reference. An overall frame of reference is needed, of course, to completely comprehend the tactical advice. I don't know which RPG you play; neither do I know what particular scenarios you play. In order to form the reference framework needed to bind together the package of tactical tips, we will now consider how a scenario is constructed, and we will place our tactical references within this construction so as to be able to have some specifics that will be applicable for each and every reader.

## THE DISAPPEARING DWARF

What's in a name? When it comes to RPG scenarios, it can be a lot or a little. I selected the name for our make-believe scenario because it can be applied to three genres.

Fantasy: *The Disappearing Dwarf* pertains to a dwarven monarch who vanished before the eyes of his entire court.

Science fiction: At the very heart of the galaxy, *The Disappearing Dwarf*, a red star, has vanished, and with it the main scientific base of the League that was located on the dwarf sun's only planet.

Espionage: Vital information was to be passed from agent to agent, but the main figure *u-as The Disappearing Dwarf*, who has vanished from the circus.

As a player in a campaign, the foregoing is perhaps all you should know about a scenario until you prepare for the actual adventure. Now let's consider what goes into any adventure scenario.

A role-playing game scenario presents an adventure, a quest that the PC group u-ill undertake in one or more play sessions. There is a current trend toward either the small or large adventure. That is, either the scenario is playable in a single session or it is on the scale of an epic that will have multiple sessions with miniconclusions and then fresh beginnings within the overall saga. Regardless of the size and scope of the scenario, the information within it is divided into two distinct portions. The GM is entitled to-and must have- knowledge of the entire work. A small part of the scenario is written expressly for the PC group. This information is furnished to the players and through them, to the PCs, prior to commencement of action and consists of three elements: background, current situation, and general information.

**Background.** The play group must have some frame of reference for their activity within the scenario. The who, what, where, w-hen, and why must be told to them. This information is read to the player group by the GM immediately. Let's consider brief treatments of *The Disappearing Dwarf*, just as if we were writing a scenario.

**Fantasy:** Fordor Goldenbeard, king of the Dwarfs of Grimberg, was one of the wisest and best rulers ever known to his folk. A month ago, in the midst of a festival in his very court, Fordor the king was seated upon his throne before the assemblage one minute; then gone the next! An immediate search of the palace was fruitless, so trace of the king could be found. Now civil war threatens the community of dwarfs as various factions contend for rulership of the kingdom.

**Science fiction:** Dorenub 132, a red dwarf sun with a single planet, is missing. It disappeared from space, gone without a trace, a month ago. This is important: because its single planet was home to a scientific community whose work centered around secret projects in the League's ongoing war against the alien Yuchty invaders. If humans stand any chance, these scientists are the group that would find it. Now they are gone, and the Yuchty are on the move.

**Espionage:** The Gesundheit Traveling Circus has toured eastern Europe for decades. One of its performers, Otto the Dwarf, was known to your intelligence organization as a key agent in the enemy's espionage apparatus. A month ago, your side was about to kidnap him, for he was known to have information vital to the defense of NATO. Then he suddenly vanished from the circus in the middle of a performance. Enemy agents on the scene are actively searching for Otto, and we can only conclude from this that they themselves did not spirit the dwarf away.

The information given here needs to be expanded, of course, for actual play, but this nutsheil presentation is sufficient for our purposes. It leads us to . . .

**Current situation.** Here the GM reads to the player group the information on who they are, why they have been selected for the

mission, what they must do, the amount of time they have to complete their mission, and u-hat must be done if and when they accomplish their goal. Also, some clues u-ill be revealed in this section of the scenario. Because we are covering much ground in a very brief amount of space, u-e will omit even a précis of the situational material. Clues are indeed needed, though, and they are covered in the section known as . . .

General information. Here are facts that go beyond a straightforward explanation of the background and how the player characters happen to have become involved. Some general information may be common knowledge; that is, anyone who lives in or travels through the scenario area (perhaps including the PCs) could be expected to know these things. Other information may only be known by certain individuals and may only be obtainable by PCs through questioning and investigation. Some of the information may be false or meaningless (especially if the GM is a devious and imaginative sort who has expanded the base of the scenario with some ideas of his own), so that part of the PCs' job is to separate the wheat from the chaff, so to speak. Following are descriptions of the general information that could be part of the foundation for each of our sample scenarios.

Fantasy: Three factions in the dwarven court vie for power. One group unequivocally supports the vanished king, so the members of that group might be expected to assist the team. The second and third factions are suspects. The second has as its candidate for interim ruler the wife of Fordor Goldenbeard. The third faction supports a cousin of the king. All three factions proclaim a deep desire to find Fordor and return him to the throne if at all possible, but it seems likely that at least one faction is lying. The following physical evidence is known: First, a thin circle of black dust appeared and fell to the ground, surrounding the throne. Then the flames of all lights within the cavern chamber flared and instantly burned out just as Fordor vanished. The king's gold cup, which he had been holding when he disappeared, was later found in the king's own bedchamber.

Science fiction: The aliens have superior technology, but it

seems unlikely that it is so far advanced over that of the League that they could “kidnap” a sun and planet. Human traitors, agents of the aliens, have been uncovered before: and such turn-coats might have managed to find their way to Dorenub’s sole planet. Three spacecraft were nearby when the disappearance occurred. One was a patrol ship of the League, another was a freighter registered out of Tau Ceti, and the third was a pleasure yacht belonging to a Terran multimillionaire.

Espionage: Otto was a clown and part of the magic act of the circus. Evidently when the dwarf was made to disappear from a large trunk, he was supposed to end up at the bottom of a slide beneath the center ring- but he never came down the chute. The magician involved was unaware of the dwarf’s role as an agent, but you are aware that a stagehand knew about Otto, because that man works for your organization. The stagehand is available for questioning. The magician’s glamorous assistant is suspected of being an enemy agent. The owner of the circus is an unknown quantity, and the Soviets are rumored to be cautious of him.

After the general information and clues are assimilated, the GM then gives the last portion of information available to the group before they ready their characters for actual play in the scenario. This last information tells them how they are to arrive at the scene of the adventure, what special equipment they have, and any other bits of knowledge or information they possess. Now the play group knows who they are, who they are working for, and what is asked of them. From this point on, they must interact directly with the GM, asking questions, stating the extent of their actions, and deciding what additional questions and actions are to be taken based on the information given to them by the game master.

As was stated a few paragraphs ago, each scenario consists of two bundles of information. The u-hole is known to the GM, but only a small portion is initially related to the players. As the team interacts with the adventure scenario, more and more information is gained by the members. Through their choices, they discover more and more. This process is laid out in the body of the

scenario. In fact, although it may seem to the players and PCs that they can do anything and everything imaginable, only certain actions are dealt with within the work. Let us consider what other content the scenario has in order to understand this fully.

In addition to the background, current situation, and general information given out to players, the GM also will have maps, charts, or diagrams of the area where the adventure activity will take place. Most if not all of this information will be available to the game master alone at the commencement of play. Perhaps the players will have incomplete maps or charts, perhaps not. The GM's information, however, will be keyed to describe what facts will be revealed if PCs interact with a certain location or item within the scenario area at a certain time. Suppose, for example, in the fantasy setting, the PCs choose to examine a sample of the black dust, which still lies on the floor around the king's throne. The game master's information will include a number or letter keyed to the black dust that will correspond to a portion of the scenario text. When the PCs act to examine the stuff, the game master will relate the information in that text to the players. This information, in turn, will direct the PCs to one or more other possible areas of action. The same is true for the other games' scenarios. The settings differ, but the mechanics are the same. PCs must either follow the clues or else move outside the scope of the scenario.

Moving outside the scenario is an important tactical consideration. It is easy to do, and a good GM will handle it so well as to make the player group uncertain of just when they did deviate from the preplanned course. The master GM will go one better. He will deliberately include information not found in the scenario as originally presented in published form. A bit of this information may actually be helpful, but the rest is for another purpose altogether. The GM will add it specifically to mislead the players, so that they will not follow any of the prescribed routes and go wandering off into a limbo that is unrelated to the adventure, even though the game master's expertise makes it all seem very "real" and part of the whole.

Why would a GM do this? Scenarios are limited even if they are



of large size. The possibilities are set down on paper. The map, for instance, might have a dozen keyed areas or a hundred, but that number is still finite and the implicit choices in the scenario are fairly obvious to a master player. Even if the right choice of clues is carefully hidden, and the obstacles to be overcome in order to reach the place where the correct clue can be found are difficult, the limited scope of the scenario is inescapable. Having fun playing is the purpose of the game. As a means to this end, the master GM extends the horizons to broaden the possibilities for challenge and playing time. Obviously the scenario contains little more than the information needed for players to begin, the GM's map, and the information that relates to the keyed areas on the map. That's it! Ancillary information can be added. Special materials not found elsewhere in the game system are common additions—new weapons, items, creatures, and so forth. Also appended might be a roster of characters, precreated adventurers for use within the scenario. Thus if for any reason the players do not use characters they themselves have created, play can commence without undue delay by utilization of these specially designed ones.

Wait a moment, you are saying. What about the end of the adventure? He just skipped through the scenario without telling us how the whole thing concludes. Right! A masterfully designed scenario will do just that as far as the players are concerned—at least as far as nonmaster players are concerned, anyway. The route will be complex and circular enough to lead them on after they have actually completed their mission. One of the keys will, of course, be the one that should bring the adventure to culmination—a successful conclusion rather than failure, that is. Unless the team is alert, however, they will be led past this in one of two ways typically. One, the GM will make it seem as if there is still some portion of the adventure to be accomplished. Two, the GM will play upon the greed of the team to make them desire additional rewards that seemingly have worth.

How does the team of players handle all this? They must become master tacticians. Having read this far, you are on your way to becoming such a player; what you must do now is apply the principles and advice that you have read about. At the same time,

you have gained vital information in the area of becoming a master GM. You know what a scenario actually contains. By knowing the parts and the purpose of an adventure, you can master, play, or even create one without particular difficulty at this juncture. Practice is needed, naturally, but you have the information.

From the foregoing, you can now fully understand the part the game master plays in the enactment of a scenario. You can also understand how easily a master GM can lead unwary players past the logical conclusion and into places they have no business being. Because every reader does not play the same game or the same scenario within the same game system, tactical considerations are hard to nail down with precise examples. The general tactical rules that were stated at the beginning of this chapter obviously apply to the example given of avoiding being led past the goal of the mission. So that you also understand the basics of scenario construction, the rest of these tactical matters should fall into place without undue difficulty. One other particular tactical consideration needs to be mentioned now, prior to moving back to the scenario examples to apply general principles to specific information. This tactical consideration is possibly the most important one of all.

The game master affects all aspects of play. Think about that, with emphasis on the word “all.” The GM furnishes all the information to the player group, before and during the playing of the scenario. He can lead, mislead, provoke, tempt, or do just about anything else in the course of each game session. You must be sensitive to the game master and listen to what he says. The GM is human, and that means he is prone to the same shortcomings you have and has strengths similar to yours. Use your real senses to determine his attitude. Use your ears and brain to hear and interpret what the GM tells you. This tactic, coupled with those we have considered already, will assure you tactical mastery of any RPG in time. Time is needed to experiment with tactics and to learn the personality of the individual who is providing the adventure when he serves as game master. Even the best poker face and

disinterested attitude of the master GM are insufficient to shield him completely from the player u-ho is master of the game and a master tactician. Bearing that in mind, let's go on to consider a few actual tactical applications.

In the science fiction scenario of *The Disappearing Dwarf*, Dorenub 132 and its sole satellite, the planet that housed the scientific hope of the League in its struggle against the alien Yuchty, has vanished. Your group of PCs has been brought in because of your marvelous record as heroes and successful minions of mankind. While it might be nice to blast the last alien forever from the ken of man, or to capture the Yuchty leaders complete with a mountain of their superior technology? that isn't the reason you were summoned to this region of the galaxy. It is simple to identify your mission. You are to find out what happened to Dorenub 132 and its planet and all upon it. Implicit in such a mission would be to recover the lot and bring them back so the scientists could again strive to put the League on equal footing with the Yuchty.

The minimum goal is to recover the scientists; that's plain also, since the planet itself is not nearly as important as the people who dwelled upon it. The objectives come down to the following, based on the information that was given before: (1) Find the three spacecraft that were in the area and question the passengers and crew for leads. It is probable that the League patrol ship will be an ally in this endeavor, but that can't be assumed as absolute, for human traitors are known to exist in the area, and one or more of the crew members might be just that. (2) From there, an examination of the place where the star and planet once were located is needed to determine if any clues as to what happened might be found there. Special instruments and knowledge previously gained might come into play. (3) From whatever has been gained from (1) and (2), the next objective should be clear.

Determining objectives enables the team to set out its plan and begin action accordingly. The remainder of the tactical knowledge is applied, as called for, along the way. The information presented by the GM, whether it is drawn from a published scenario or from the game master's own creation, is given to enable you to operate

within the framework and scope of the adventure. Some portions will be misleading or extraneous. Clear thinking, careful consideration? and tactical ability will cut through such material and find the heart of the matter. This applies as well to science fiction, fantasy, espionage, or any other genre equally. I suggest you use the other examples here (the fantasy and espionage versions of the scenario; to try a bit of tactical work yourself. Take the facts as given and write down the obvious mission. Note the goal, and then put down the objectives that seem probable as steps toward attaining the goal of the mission. That is good practice for the next few adventures you and your team will undertake.

A final point needs to be dealt with here, for tactical purposes and for completion of the survey of scenario design. There must be a purpose for the existence of the scenario, some “victory” point at which the team achieves its actual purpose for being there in the first place. The beginning of a scenario has only a few possible starting places, perhaps only one. Choices become manifold as play progresses, and certain areas of action lead to dead (literally) ends. Unless the scenario is badly designed, however, there will be two or more possible conclusions, with one of them describing a partial success. Usually total success depends on players performing correctly. That is, just because they physically arrive at the “right” juncture of space and time with their PCs, there is no automatic triumph. Correct thinking and correct actions must be performed in order to succeed. Furthermore, the goal point in the scenario isn’t always marked as such. Neither is it always the last area of activity within the whole of the adventure.

Because well-designed scenarios will often conceal the fact of having achieved the goal area from players, and a master GM always does so, the players must use their tactical skills to recognize success when it occurs. The goal might be to infiltrate the domain of some terrible opponent, capture some being, gain information, or find some special items. In fact, the scenario might cleverly make the goal seem to include many of these ends. Careful consideration of the preliminary statements in a scenario will surely reveal the main purpose of the adventure. In the SF version of *The Disappearing Dwarf*, there were several suggestions that

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could be taken as goals-deliver a setback to the Yuchty aliens, bring in loads of their technology, uncover traitors. Clearly, however, the one reason the adventurers are summoned to the area is to discover what happened to Dorenub 132 and its planetful of scientists. That-and that alone- is the key to success. The other things are frosting on the cake. Why? Well, whatever damage the PCs might inflict on the Yuchty, it will be minimal. These aliens are fighting a war in the galaxy and have what must be a huge base of resources. Just as obviously, capture of the Yuchty technology would not be particularly useful because all the scientists who could quickly comprehend and utilize the information are gone. Last, discovering u-ho, if any, the traitors were who assisted the aliens in their dastardly deed is rather like locking the barn door after the horse is stolen.

Just for the sake of this discussion, let's assume that Dorenub 132 did not disintegrate or actually shift in location. Through some sort of high-technology polarization, it was oriented at a right angle relative to its previous orientation. That is, it is still exactly where it was before, but it can't be seen or detected by normal means. It can be passed through by anything within the galaxy because it is on a different "frequency" from the objects that still exist in a state of normal polarity. In such a situation, the team would have to discover this fact in order to succeed. With this discovery would probably come information as to how it was done, but a partial victory could be gained even if the group failed to obtain the data pertaining to how the polarization was accomplished. Let us assume that we give an award of 3 points for discovering the fact that the system was polarized, 7 more for the "how" of the matter, and additional points for discovering other things-1 for uncovering traitors, 2 for delivering blows to the aliens through destruction of their vehicles and personnel, and 3 for capture of important technology. A "perfect" score for the scenario would thus total 16 points. (This point scoring is not absolute but is used only as a measure of relative degrees of accomplishment.)

This doesn't mean that the team must strive for a clean sweep. The theoretical maximum is attainable, but only if the circum-

stances permit. Bad luck, incautious play, and other factors must dictate the final actions of the group. Better to score 10 points, with the PCs finishing the mission alive and well, than to push for a possible 16 in which part or all of the team dies just as the triumph is gained. This is where tactical mastery truly comes into its own. Do what you can, do it as well and efficiently as you can, and never lose sight of the most important RPG goal of all—enjoyment and fulfillment for you, and the continued survival and development of your precious player characters.



# Chapter 8



## DESIGNING YOUR OWN GAME

Someone who achieves mastery as a GM does not actually need to design his own RPG to qualify for that status. However, a master GM will quite probably have the knowledge to accomplish this ultimate feat of creativity in the role-playing-game field, and a master should certainly understand and appreciate the concepts of RPG design whether or not he chooses to put that knowledge into practice. This chapter is especially for those who do have the desire to try their hand at full-fledged game design and also for those who want to deepen their understanding of just how a good role-playing game is structured and built. Although it is not a full treatise on designing role-playing games — for such a piece of work could comprise a book all by itself — this chapter should be required reading for the sake of the basic guidance it provides, to keep the would-be designer from getting off on the wrong foot and having to backtrack later.

Before a single rule is written or even thought about, the designer must make three important decisions concerning his game-to-be: its genre, its period, and its scope.

Genre is the basic area of game play considered. It can be science fiction, fantasy, espionage, or any of a host of others. (The

principal genres of RPGs and their salient features are described in Chapter 6.) Personal preference is the key to this decision, and the likes and dislikes of your player group are the secondary factor. The players' preferences are placed second for a very important reason: You, as designer and future GM of the game you create, must know and be dedicated to the design subject or else the game will suffer accordingly. A poor design based on a very popular genre will be rejected. An excellent offering on a subject that has little popularity will at worst bring enjoyment when played by the few who are attracted to the genre. As will be seen later, choice of genre is not limited to one of the basic types; the genre of your game may be a mixture of properties taken from more than one of the basic types or a hybrid that lies somewhere apart from and between them.

*Period* refers essentially to the time period the game will take place within, and this decision also encompasses the underlying assumptions that will be accepted as facts of the time period when the game is supposed to take place. For instance, in a science fiction game, the period might be the near future, the far future, or somewhere in between. The amount of "technological" differences in the rules will be affected by the time choice. Can we travel faster than light? Are there planet-destroying beams? Is matter transmission possible? Similarly, in the fantasy genre, the period selection relates to the bases for the "law" that will govern the game reality. What mythos is used? How powerful is magic? What sorts of creatures exist? Finally, espionage as a genre must also consider time. Are we considering spying in the 1930s and 1940s? How about current espionage? In fact, spies have been around for about as long as wars, so we can work well into the past or project into the future-but not in one single game!

Scope is critical because it tells us where play is to begin and where it is to go. Do player characters begin by commanding fleets of starships? Do they start their game existences as mighty demigods in the mold of Hercules? As the master spies of all time? If the PCs' beginnings are too lofty, then you have the possibly insoluble problem of determining where they progress to as the game goes on. If their beginnings are more modest, then you will probably



have an easier time deciding how and to where they progress. The choice of scope, and how you deal with the attendant questions and problems of “what happens next,” will play a crucial part in determining how much of an ongoing nature the game campaign will have.

Let’s assume you’ve opted for a combination of all three genres mentioned. You’ll do a science fiction espionage game with a fantasy component. It will take place on Earth (primarily) in the near future, and the fantasy elements will be a mixture of mental powers (extrasensory perception, telekinesis, and such) and magic—some actually vested in the natives of the world (such as voodoo, and some bestowed by alien, demonlike beings in return for total commitment to their evil ways. The player characters will start as good guys who are recruited to become agents charged with the duty of fighting against the vile beings from elsewhere and those evil governments and persons who are in league with them. Exactly where the PCs will progress to is undetermined at this point, but the chosen scope is small enough to be manageable; in all likelihood, their paths of progression will end short of the point at which they gain enough power to be in control of a government.

## WRITING THE RULES

Now it’s time to figure out how to build a role-playing game to fit the genre(s), period, and scope selected for play. The major considerations for rules themselves are these: technological base; game area; time scale(s); distance scale(s); movement; combat at a distance; hand-to-hand combat; morale; player character generation; non-player character generation; opponents; reward system for progression; and specifics of unknown or unreal weapons and powers.

Although most of these elements are relatively self-explanatory and many of them have been treated in some detail in Chapter 5, let’s take a brief look at each facet to make certain it is understood.

Technological base is a catch-all term encompassing just about

everything we take for granted. Our technological base in the real world includes radio, television, computers, jet aircraft, and so forth. What is the base we will use in our hypothetical game? Since it is set in the near future, it won't be too hard to extrapolate from present-day reality. This world of the near future will have better means of communication, faster travel, slightly better weapons, better medicine, better means of disguise. If we place the action one hundred years from now, it should be fairly easy to manage this factor, yet we have gone far enough into the future to make it possible to rationalize the existence of any sort of technology (orbiting space stations, for instance: that we need to make the game work.

Game area, also known as the milieu, covers where the action will take place. In our model, it would be assumed that the political divisions of Earth will have altered quite a bit in the hundred years from "then" to "now" (in game terms). We presume the existence of space stations orbiting Earth, a base on the moon, and mining operations taking place in the asteroid belt. The game area takes all these "realities" into account: Play will range across and around Earth, into the space stations, and on to the moon, Mars perhaps, and the asteroids. Even with such a vast area in which game activity can take place, the door is still open to expansion of the milieu as game play goes on. Perhaps in the not-so-near future, technology will improve to make travel to the outer reaches of the solar system possible. Someday (if the game and the campaign remain viable long enough), PCs may use interstellar travel and actually take on the evil aliens on their home planet. Expansion of milieu in a developing, growing game is likely and good.

*Time scale(s)* come in several "sizes," all of which will be used by the GM to help determine what can be done and how long it takes to perform a certain task. The game system must consider how to measure time during periods of inactivity by PCs, time in getting to where action is to take place, time during nonconfrontational play, and time during combat. In fact, the latter might well be subdivided into time during space travel and time during other

forms of combat. The time scales must be fixed in order to determine rules for movement, but time is only one part of this equation.

Distance *scale(s)* tell us how far a person or vehicle can move in the various time intervals chosen. It's fine to start with a basic assumption: In a week, let us say, anyone can travel anywhere. Okay, but how far can someone or something move in a day? What if the traveler is on foot? On the back of a mount? In a land vehicle, a water craft: or a spaceship? Then again, how much distance can any of those forms of transportation cover in a period of a minute? Ten seconds? One second? What sorts of actions can be taken in these shorter intervals of time? Answers to questions like these will be paramount in selecting the distance scales, your measurement intervals for the game. The distance scales are the other half of the equation needed for determination of movement rules.

*Movement* can be defined and quantified once the time and distance scales are known. Obviously there must be varying systems of measurement in a game that considers the wide range of speeds and distances we are talking about. Perhaps "movement" is too narrow a term for this element, for it involves much more than simply traveling from one place to another. Along with literal movement come a host of other activities that are considered within the realm of time and distance. Starting engines, gathering speed, shooting weapons, detecting enemies, sending messages, and much more need to be quantified within the overall time/distance/movement framework.

*Combat at a distance* considers all forms of weapons that can hit targets from more than ten meters distance, let us say. The weapons involved range from gigantic lasers and particle beams to the simple projectiles that are expelled from crossbows and blow-guns. In addition to defining the weapons themselves in physical terms, we must also address the questions of detection devices and their ranges, communications range, rate of fire, and how much damage these weapons cause to various materials. Sighting, screening, and defensive considerations such as armor are also part of this section of the rules.

**Hand-to-hand combat**, also known as combat at close quarters, or simply melee, deals with various hand-held striking weapons, projectile weapons used (if the circumstances permit) in close quarters, and nonweapon combat (barehanded blows, kicks, holds, and so forth). Number of attacks possible, defenses, and damage are considered here.

**Morale** concerns the mental effect on allies and enemies of certain events during the course of near-combat or combat. It does not apply to PCs, but it must be used for special non-player characters, ordinary personages (soldiers, bystanders, etc.), and creatures that are able to be affected by events. Rules for morale address much more than simply whether a character or creature runs away from conflict or combat; certain factors can contribute to high morale, meaning that the character or creature actually advances or attacks instead of hesitating or retreating. **Reaction** is a good alternative name for this concept. Typical events that influence the morale, or reaction, of an ally or adversary are one side or the other taking heavy losses, being surrounded, losing or winning some key thing, or the triumph or death of a leader. When you are devising rules to cover morale or reaction, remember that someone or something must have at least a modicum of intelligence to evidence a reaction in some cases. For instance, fire might frighten beasts away by its mere presence, if the beasts are smart enough to know what fire is and what it can do, but stupid creatures won't be frightened until the fire burns them. Attitude also plays a big part; disloyal troops might leave at the first excuse, such as the sight of the enemy, while troops that are fanatically loyal to their cause might battle to the last man despite any occurrence that might discourage the less fervent. This can be a broad rules area, if the designer so chooses, but in a role-playing game it must never be used for characters actually played by game participants. Only the players of those PCs are in a position to know what their characters' reactions will be. If the game includes rules that force PCs to behave in a certain way in a given situation, then in this respect at least, it is not a true role-playing game.

**Player character generation** is one of the most critical portions of any RPG. At the root of everything, a character is no more and

no less than a set of numbers, each of which refers to the value or amount of a certain ability or characteristic that the character possesses. Those numbers are normally generated by rolling dice, and then the dice scores are assigned to the various attributes (physical prowess, intelligence, cunning, charisma, whatever) that describe the makeup of the character. Dice are used either singly, to generate a number in a linear probability progression (1 to 10 or 1 to 20, for instance, with one ten-sided or twenty-sided die, respectively), or in combinations of two or more rolls to produce results on a curve (2 to 12 from the total of two six-sided dice, 2 to 20 from two ten-sided dice, and so on). With the former method, a high score for an attribute is just as likely as a low score. In the latter system, the very highest and very lowest scores are quite rare, and most results will be in the middle range.

The system you use will depend on how much **significance** a character's attributes have in the overall scheme of things and what the nature of those attributes is. Generally a system that determines attributes by a linear probability also allows for attributes to be increased or decreased during play, so that a character is not necessarily hampered for life by an unlucky low score in some area and not necessarily forever invincible just because the original score was a high one. Conversely, attribute scores assigned to the total of multiple dice rolls are more or less fixed at their original level for the life of the character, or it takes relatively much more time and effort to effect a change. This is not a **hard-and-fast** tenet, but it is a good line of reasoning to follow when setting up your character-generation system.

The generated attributes of PCs help quantify just what a character can and cannot do, or how difficult it is for him to perform some task. Obviously the physically stronger of two PCs should have a better chance of bashing down a door or lifting a boulder, for instance, while the more intelligent of the two will have an easier time figuring out how some strange weapon or piece of technology is operated.

Another important part of character generation is how a character's specific abilities (as opposed to attributes) will be expressed. In Chapter 5, the differences between a class-based

system and a skill-based system were briefly described. Essentially these are your choices: Will characters be “slotted” into certain professions, or classes, or will each one be expressed as a unique combination of different skills? It is possible, as was pointed out in the earlier passages on this subject, to devise a system that includes aspects of both these methodologies. What you decide to do about this issue will have a direct bearing on questions regarding the reward system and character progression (see p. 147).

Other decisions pertaining to the nature of characters must be made as part of this section of rules. How will the game account for people and creatures of differing moral and ethical outlooks? Are beings either good or evil, or are there other divisions and categories between those extremes that deserve distinction? The AD&D game uses a spectrum of nine different alignments, ranging from lawful good (the goodest of the good guys) to chaotic evil (the baddest of the bad). Your system may be this complex, or your game milieu may be such that fewer shades of gray need to be defined between the extremes of black and white.

How will you quantify a character’s or creature’s ability to suffer injury or absorb damage without being killed? Most **role-**playing games use some form of system based on “hit points.” Weapons and other things that injure or damage each cause the victim to lose a certain number of hit points from a predetermined maximum, and if a victim’s hit-point total reaches zero, he is dead. Generally a hit-point system is structured so that a character with higher scores in the physical attribute areas will have relatively more hit points than a character whose best attribute scores are in the mental and psychological areas.

All character attributes assist the participants in one of the singular features of these games-role-playing. If a dice score indicates that a character has a low degree of cunning, for instance, then the player of that character is obliged to do his best to portray the character in that vein when that particular attribute comes into play during a scenario. A character whose alignment is basically good should be role-played in a markedly different way from one whose outlook is neutral or evil.

The generation and initial development of the character prior to

actual play is very necessary. Indeed, without a sophisticated and comprehensive system for character generation, we would have a role assumption rather than a role-playing game. In some games, character generation is a very tedious and time-consuming process that puts off even old hands at gaming. This can be alleviated to some extent, I believe, by careful and clever rule design and some imaginative methods of keeping action and adventure in the process of statistical generation and the recording of character information.

**Non-player** character generation will generally follow the method(s) used to create PCs. However, there are necessary shortcuts and parcels of information included in a carefully done game, or else the poor GM will be forever immersed in the morass of finding out the precise nature of who his players meet, who opposes them, and the like. It should not be necessary for the GM to roll dice to determine all the attribute scores of every **non-player** character, for instance. The game must include provisions for defining **NPCs** so that they can be generated quickly, but without causing every such character to be a mirror image of every other one. Although it is a relatively short and minor part of any game, this area is still interesting, for it will show just how well thought out the design is.

**Opponents** are the creatures and things that will generally be adverse, at best nonhostile, to the PCs. Enemy **NPCs** fall into this category but have already been considered in the preceding paragraph. The flora and fauna of the game milieu, the detection devices used to spot them, booby traps, enemy weapons, and the like are covered in this broad area. Anything that can be encountered and must thereafter be dealt with should be quantified in this section of the rules. How much damage does a certain creature cause when it attacks, and how many hit points of damage can it absorb before it is killed? Do certain creatures normally appear in groups, or singly? Is a certain creature more likely to be found in one type of terrain or climate than another? If a creature or character falls into a pit or is buffeted by an avalanche of rocks, how much damage does the victim suffer? If a plant has leaves that are poisonous, what effect do they have on a character or creature

that ingests them? This area of the rules can be very, very broad in a science fiction or fantasy game. In the AD&D game, three **full-size** books are devoted entirely to brief descriptions of the plants and animals that may populate the game world, and it is a fairly easy matter for someone familiar with the game to devise his own creations to replace or supplement this roster. That is one of the charms of selecting a genre that is not tied very closely to the real world; there is always a new alien beast or race, a new monster to discover and deal with.

**Reward system for progression** refers to the method by which a PC will gain for successfully completing a mission or quest or case. In a class-based character system, “experience points” are typically awarded to signify advancement in one’s profession. In such systems, various added benefits are acquired by accumulation of these points as characters advance from one level to a higher level in the chosen class. In a skill-based system, each success is rewarded by giving the character an opportunity to add to his knowledge base with a new skill, enhance his ability in an existing skill, or improve one of his specific attributes. Not a few designs use a little of both systems to give a third approach.

No matter how your system for rewards and progression is set up, one factor is critical: The size or value of the reward must always be tailored to the scope of the accomplishment for which the reward is given. If big rewards are gained too easily, or if characters have to stare death in the face just to get a crumb tossed to them by the GM, then it is safe to assume that the game has a considerable flaw. Unless the GM is most capable, the activity will quickly become an exercise in either boredom or futility, and in either case, players may decide to give up the game rather than put up with it. This is a major area for the designer to consider in his efforts!

**Specifics.** . . If your game’s technological base includes such items as an ultramodern tank or a magic wand, it’s not enough simply to stipulate that these things exist. Because they will come into play, facts need to be known about them—facts that must be incorporated into the game design. The tank must be described in terms of its speed, armor, weapons, range, crew, perhaps data



pertaining to sighting and tracking equipment-not a body of information that anyone is likely to have in his head, so these facts must be researched and then incorporated into the rules. As for the wand, what sort of magical effect does it exude? Is it small enough to be concealed in a pouch or pocket? How often, or how many times, can it be used before its power is depleted? These specifications must come from the imagination of the designer, whose conclusions are tempered by other facts about the game world and what he wants the overall game design to accomplish.

At the other extreme, how is a simple modern-day flashlight described in game terms? Only a little information is needed: its type, its battery power, and that should do it. If there arise any questions about range or duration of its illumination, the object's fragility, and so forth, the GM (who may be, but will not necessarily be, the designer himself) can handle them, because he is at least basically familiar with what such an item is capable of.

The point is this: When we move backward in time, forward into imaginary time, or into a world of fantasy, we have less and less hard information to draw upon. As our internal information base shrinks, we must substitute an external one. Thus, the further removed from reality the RPG is, the larger must be the information base that provides the GM and players with specifics of unknown or unreal weapons and powers.

If the genre, period, and scope of the game are removed from present-day reality and sufficient information of this sort is not incorporated into the rules, a master GM can manage very well indeed on a dab of this and a smattering of that, but only if he is willing and capable enough to provide the specifics himself and in so doing develop his own variant of the game. If he is compelled to do this often enough, his version of the game will quickly become a very personalized design, and, unless the GM records and reuses the specifics he creates, a design that is likely to alter from time to time as memory fails and one that no other GM could possibly duplicate.

Thus it should come as no surprise that requiring the GM to supply a lot of specific information results in a game that is highly

unpalatable to most other participants (the players), especially those who are currently taking part in more than one campaign based on the same game—because when the differences in specifics are considered, the game is not the same game after all. A well-designed RPG will include a lot of specific information, so that various campaigns utilizing the same set of rules will have much in common (regardless of how different the campaigns might be), and to avoid the unpleasant situations that occur when a GM is forced to do game-design work in addition to **campaign-design** work.

Those are the components that go into the design of a role-playing game. Think about them for a bit, then go to your favorite RPG and see how the information given here fits when it is applied to the actual design. Modify the advice given here according to your tastes. Then take all the systems and approaches you like from your favorite game, and discard all the rest. Hopefully, there will be at least three quarters of the original game remaining. (If not, go to your second favorite game and see if you have better results. If that doesn't work, start your own game from scratch!) You'll now examine the portions you do *not* like. Take these apart paragraph by paragraph, table by table, and see what makes the rules tick. That way you'll be able to zero in on exactly what you don't feel comfortable with in the design. Now you're ready to write your own rules to replace those you've excised from the game.

The “three quarters” recommendation was given for a good reason. No existing game design can suffer extensive revision without becoming either radically different or totally unplayable. For example, as I related near the end of Chapter 3 in a different context, a few years ago the use of spell points became vogue, not to say faddish. The Advanced Dungeons & Dragons game system was criticized for not using spell points. Avid tinkerers rushed to get their particular method of using spell points into print. I was vilified, pointed at as a reactionary, possibly a despot, when I

vocally resisted the notion that a spell-point system would fit into the AD&D game. Not only is such a system incongruous, I asserted, but its inclusion would destroy the campaign.

The AD&D game has a magic system that provides powerful spells to low-level PCs. This allows them to be viable characters at low levels of experience. Since the spells any character can use are limited in number and in the level (power) of their magic, game balance is maintained as characters gain experience and become able to cast more powerful spells. In the design, magic-using PCs have “memorized” the spells they will “carry” during the course of their adventure, and once it is used, the spell usually cannot be recalled. In contrast, a spell-point system operates on the notion of magical energy. You have “x” points of magical energy. Which spell you use is immaterial so long as the energy remains. Although such a rule eliminates the necessity of planning and considering what might occur during the course of an adventure, it is a viable system if the spells designed to be used with it are aimed at the governing energy-level concept, the characters using them are restricted in their selection of potential castings, and the whole of the design is written not to merely accommodate spell points but to utilize the concept with respect to other actions. How about mental power points? Physical power points? The idea is sound, and characters in such a game should be structured to utilize it in all its extrapolations.

For those who are interested, by the way, the concept of using spell points as part of the AD&D game withered away when it was ascertained that in such a setup, players tended to desire the invincible magic-user as a PC. Campaigns did indeed die and have to be reinstituted on the old basis of spell memorization, as per the rules. In fact, spell points are not very highly regarded these days. That’s a shame, for the mechanics and rationale behind the concept are fine. All that is needed is a game designed to use the approach. Keep this in mind as you design or revise rules for your own game creation. A good RPG is a complex mesh of many factors. Get the rules gears out of synchronization, and the vehicle grinds to a halt.

After you have outlined the new portions you believe will make the overall design superior, begin testing them with your player group. Listen to the players' comments and criticisms, and as you develop and finalize rules, adjust them for such input. When you've fleshed out the material so that you have a set of rules on paper comparable to a professional game, the final play testing can begin. For example, the Dungeons & Dragons game grew out of the *Chainmail* Fantasy Rules Supplement. It took about one year to have the prototype of the D&D game tested sufficiently to put it into print. However, by the time it was published (January 1974), the system had grown and changed so much already as to require more fleshing out (with the *Greyhawk* supplement) as soon as possible. Of course, when the first supplement was done, we found the game was ready for more, and the booklets entitled *Blackmoor* and *Eldritch Wizardry* came along. Now ground is no longer being broken in the D&D game rules; they are as complete and as comprehensive as they need to be. But since that first RPG was created and developed, there have been scores of similar games published, and design and development of rules—or even a completely new game—is no longer so difficult. There are many tried and tested models to select from. Nonetheless, it will take a few months of intense play for you to know if your rules are complete and adequate.

There is more reason for doing this than an exercise in creativity. If you can actually design and develop rules and systems that work, you can easily understand and analyze other works. You can then be a better player, a better game master, and even a better designer. This is not to say that you need to create your own game or game system, but by knowing how to do so, you can take a design that is good but flawed and correct the weak areas, retaining the basic elements of the system and enabling your group to continue to find entertainment in its play. Master player, master GM, and master designer are roles that are very close to one another. Few, if any, of us can be all three. Still, each of these roles is such that the individuals who actually qualify in one category or another understand and assist the others. The master player ac-

commodates the master GM, the master GM the master player, and both accommodate the game design they have selected. The master game designer must accommodate both player and GM, of course, so his role is more difficult in that regard. Standing apart from all three types of masters is the rare individual who deserves — indeed, requires — further distinction as a Grand Master.



## Chapter 9



# MASTERY ON THE GRAND SCALE

**M**astery of role-playing games is, to some extent, a matter of degree. One can be a master player within the scope of a campaign or in the larger field of the game system upon which it is based. At the other end of the scale, one can so excel in bringing enjoyment to the players and the game master that he has shown mastery of the spirit behind all role-playing games, which is entertainment through group activity. Mastery is expressed as advancing the enjoyment of the group through creative input to the campaign, with its greater application being expressed by contribution to other campaigns or to the game system itself. The various sorts of mastery are certainly worthwhile. Each should be encouraged and expanded in order to become as all-encompassing as possible. This is because of the nature of role-playing games. Just as each campaign's expression of the game upon which it is based is a cooperative effort by the participant group, so, too, is

the whole of the campaigns within the game system. Above this greater whole is the community of players.

Mastery of play is demonstrated by the approbation of the campaign group. The group knows and proclaims its best player(s). As the most accomplished of those individuals play in multiple campaigns, or in club and regional tournaments, an overall excellence of playing ability will be demonstrated. As players successfully compete in national tournaments, they will gradually win recognition throughout the community of RPG enthusiasts as master players.

Progress within the realm of mastery is much the same for the game master. After demonstrating excellence within the group, he is encouraged to provide players outside the group with the same entertainment. Through communication with other GMs, and eventually through service as a tournament game master, the GM demonstrates mastery.

In one respect, there is a difference between player and game master excellence. The GM is required to communicate his skills through two channels. In addition to actual game mastering, the master GM must also communicate ideas to others through periodical publications in order to demonstrate the highest level of mastery. By so doing, the GM shares his insight and knowledge with other enthusiasts. In general, this is not possible for players, for game scenarios differ, and no master player would ever communicate information pertaining to a scenario to other players who have not experienced its challenges.

Those who demonstrate unusual ability through their grasp of the spirit of a game system are the most difficult to quantify with respect to mastery. Whether GM or player, such individuals might not be the best in tangible terms, but through their efforts, the game is properly understood, campaigns become superior, and play can excel. Because of the nature of role-playing games, those who are truly masters of this aspect of RPGs will typically demonstrate it on the highest level by published work. Question answering, rules interpretation, and articles that build the underlying spirit of the game are the fortes of these individuals.

Beyond mastery is Grand Mastery. To be a Grand Master is as

much a state of mind as it is an indication of general acceptance of the individual as such by the gaming community. The desire to contribute to other gamers' enjoyment of role-playing is part of the attitude behind Grand Mastery. The approbation of the enthusiasts enables the Grand Master to maintain his confidence and energy. In turn, he utilizes these qualities to bring more enjoyment to his fellows. Because of group synergism within the campaign, there are greater and greater levels of the same force spiraling all the way to the limits of the entire community. Somewhere near the summit of this spiral stand the Grand Masters of role gaming. Their position is attained only through their contributions to the community and the acceptance of their efforts by the community. In this regard, role-playing games are unlike all other forms of gaming. Other games are competitive, but **role-playing** games are cooperative. Therein lies the vast difference that separates **RPGs** from all others.

Chess, for example, has ratings and tournaments that enable the organizations formed to promote that game to rank all participants and determine a champion and the top players. Other games with sufficient followings -card games, table games, board games, whatever -do similar things. This is not possible in the RPG community because of the diversity of role-playing games. Within even the largest-selling game's followers, there is a diversity of campaign expressions of the game system. Play is similar in different scenarios that have much in common, but there is no ultimate winning goal, and players cooperate rather than compete with each other. What brings role-playing gamers together is their interest in the imaginative, group-cooperative games that allow them to assume personas of adventurous sorts of make-believe individuals. Role-playing games form a community of interest that brings together a diverse audience engaged in the play of diverse games and gives them a commonality that is unique.

Those individuals who contribute heavily to the community are recognized by the community as Grand Masters. In some cases, this is achieved by formal recognition, in other cases, through general acclaim. In any case, there is no distinctive title of Grand Master bestowed by the community at large upon the deserving



individual. It is a state of mind that extends to the individual and the community. Furthermore, the status is more the result of a popularity or opinion poll than a ranking system. Nonetheless, it is a status that is desirable and most worthwhile.

You might wonder if the Grand Master is as imaginary as the adventures in make-believe that role-playing games provide. After all, with no way to measure absolute playing skill, with no means of measuring campaigns, no method of determination as to who is the best game master, how can excellence be measured to justify the term Grand Master? Wouldn't it be fair to say that this concept is nothing more than a conceit? The answer to that last question is straightforward and negative. There are thousands of RPG enthusiasts who would have it otherwise. The status is, after all, conferred only through their recognition.

## **THE GRAND MASTER PLAYER**

It is necessary to discuss the Grand Master player before going on to what makes a Grand Master in all respects. The Grand Master player is the commensurate RPG participant. He, along with a group of expert or better players, will soon have the best of game masters with the most difficult of scenarios on the proverbial ropes. At the same time, if the play isn't of tournament sort, this individual will assist the GM in whatever methods are best suited to allow all the other participants to have maximum enjoyment within the limits imposed by the game and its campaign expression. The Grand Master player will, for instance, plan for a play session and stretch it far beyond the scope that the game master envisioned. By judicious selection of resources available to the PCs, and their most conservative and efficient use, the PC group will range far beyond the expected limits and achieve ends and rewards not anticipated by the GM. They actually wear down the GM and take him unawares (unprepared) because of the ability of the Grand Master within their team. A Grand Master player has such a thorough understanding and appreciation of his PC and the character's niche within the game environment that he can often

perceive possibilities and opportunities that escape the notice of the GM until the Grand Master player begins to take advantage of them.

The role-playing aspect of the activity enables the Grand Master player to keep the play from becoming unmanageable. At some point, the best of game masters must react to protect the campaign, and if it is being ravaged by PCs, then they will be dealt with harshly in game terms. Some adversary in the game will strip the PCs of power or eliminate them entirely. The Grand Master knows the limits and the methods of play that will enable the GM to escape the situation gracefully, as it were. The session becomes a legendary fete, something to be told of in tales of gaming excellence, and this reflects well on the GM.

Even master players will not recognize the manipulation. The Grand Master game master will, and he will appreciate it, as will other Grand Master players. The Grand Master uses his wealth of knowledge and skill to bring great excitement into the campaign, to broaden the vistas it presents, and to save sessions from disastrous results such as character death or excessive events that threaten the campaign's viability. Because he understands the purpose of the game and the scope of its campaign expression, he does not abuse his ability to gain at the expense of the group.

The Grand Master player will also be recognized by another area of activity. Grand Master players are interested in the highest level of play, so they will enter tournaments. Tournament play enables them to test themselves against the best of scenarios presented by the master **GMs**, and with a variety of other players ranging from rank amateurs to other Grand Masters. Over the course of time, certain individuals emerge as Grand Master players. They consistently enter tournaments and just as consistently place among the finalists in these tournaments. In general, the knowledge of just who these persons are is limited to the core of active RPG enthusiasts, but this in no way detracts from the recognition. Grand Master players are in a category all by themselves. It is the diversity of games played throughout the hobby that prevents them from receiving formal recognition throughout

the whole community. The whole pursuit is yet in its infancy, however, and it is to be hoped that this situation will be rectified in due course.

## GRAND MASTER GMS

Grand Master **GMS** are known by their overall participation in the community. They are aware of the broad nature of the pursuit, play a diversity of **RPGs**, serve as GM for several campaigns based on diverse game systems over the course of time, and contribute to the community through articles and designs. Their play level is excellent even in games they are not familiar with because they understand the purpose of role-playing games, the significance of the group, and the multiplicity of things that go into the play of any given PC. They might not be the best at any one activity involved in the pursuit of **RPGs**, but they are excellent in each and every activity they undertake.

The Grand Master GM is a superior game master, a superior player, a superior spokesman for the community, and a good fellow to be with. He promotes the whole of the RPG concept, adds to the enjoyment of role gaming on all levels, and is a good companion outside the play session. His social and cooperative nature extends from the core group of his close associates in a campaign all the way to the whole of the broad community that is the role-playing game hobby. Still, the Grand Master is an individual and deeply committed to individual excellence and competition within the group(s).

Individual excellence of a cooperative sort contributes to the overall good of the group, but at the same time, it allows the individual to gain personally. The enjoyment is part of the reward gained, and so is the recognition given for the effort he has put forth. In this regard, activity in the role-playing game hobby can be likened to the American free enterprise business system. That concept and other applications of role-playing are not within the scope of this work, but the reader is advised to think about these parallels carefully.

To contrast and compare the master GM with the Grand **Mas-**

ter GM, one need only examine the degree of activity and level of success attained to determine the criteria that place one above the other. All that which goes into the making of the master is part of the Grand Master. The latter, though, goes one step further and demonstrates a greater ability in both diversity and skill. While it is human nature to desire to be the very best at what we undertake, it is also the nature of humans to be different and have differing capabilities. Given that all within the general gaming community have a commonality, there are differences in desire and varying degrees of capability. Strive as one might, the level of Grand Master might never be attained. Ideas, for example, need to be communicated to others who will find them beneficial; but if the one having these ideas is unable to articulate them, then the others will not gain the benefit. It is the striving toward Grand Mastery that is really meaningful. Unless you put forth the effort, you will never know the limits of what you can contribute, the level of enjoyment you can attain. Aspiration in and of itself is a reward that too few gain.

It is necessary for the aspiring Grand Master GM to be aware of the extent of the RPG community and the scope of the hobby activity itself. The reason for the existence of RPGs must be understood. The scope of game systems available must be known, and their basic mechanics understood. The means of communication throughout the community must be familiar to the aspiring Grand Master, and he must use them for the benefit of the community. Similarly, he will take part in the activities of the community to enhance the whole-local, regional, and national convention attendance; membership in local, regional, and national RPG organizations; participation in tournaments as player or game master. Last, he will support the community through active promotion of role-playing games as a desirable pursuit, thus bringing in new enthusiasts, enhancing the image of the activity in the eyes of the public, and even defending it against unwarranted attacks by those who might view it as something other than what it is.

Just as a striving toward mastery is aimed at bringing the individual greater satisfaction, so, too, the aspiration toward Grand Mastery evidences a desire to gain the utmost from the pursuit of role-playing games. Because the desire itself gains satisfaction for the individual, and those who game with him are rewarded as well, the pursuit of excellence is meritorious in and of itself. Success is simply icing on top of the cake of enjoyment. To know that you have brought enjoyment and fun to your friends is gratifying. To extend this to a larger group is more satisfying still—both to the individual who accomplishes it and to those who participated with the individual. Thus the final measure of Grand Mastery is twofold. The first mark is the degree and longevity of enjoyment that was furnished. The second is the number of individuals to whom the enjoyment was furnished.

What begins as a self-centered desire for entertainment alters to become a group-oriented sharing of enjoyment. The greater the understanding of the group nature of the pursuit, and the higher the degree of effort to satisfy group and individual needs, the greater the degree of mastery. When acceptance by the peer group reaches a certain level, then Grand Mastery is indicated. If acceptance is sustained, then Grand Mastery is granted on a basis that will be measured by and sustained by the community over the fullness of time. More cannot be said.



# Chapter 10



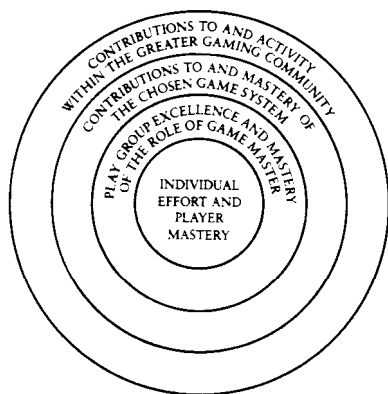
## AN OVERVIEW OF PROGRESS TOWARD MASTERY

**B**y now, each reader understands what needs to be known, what must be understood, and what course to follow in successfully striving toward mastery of role-playing games. Beyond that, there is the awareness of the contributions given and recognition received, which are the marks of Grand Mastery. All references are in the most general of terms, for role-playing games are many and varied, and winning is not part of one of them. Winning is what each participant does by enjoying the game. Tournament play aside, the winners are those who give the most. This also applies to tournament play to some extent, for those who excel there have attained a degree of mastery.

There is so much to understand, so many varied ways to view the role-playing-game activity in order to comprehend what mastery is, that another perspective might be useful. So far, we have viewed the layers from the inside out, moving through one and then examining the next. Just as there are many perspectives from

which to play an RPG, so, too, there are many views possible in the examination of mastery. The game master, however, is the “sighted man” who observes the “blind men” examining an elephant. One blind examiner is at the front, feeling the trunk, and he describes the elephant as snakelike. Those at the sides say the elephant is like a wall, while the four near its legs say it is treelike. In order to allow you a “sighted” view of the role-playing game “elephant,” it was first necessary to supply you with the ability to see. That is, you needed the insights and information to fully comprehend what the whole entails. With such understanding, you have now attained the height from which to view the whole in a new perspective. Instead of feeling parts, you can see and understand how these parts form the whole of the “elephant.”

Imagine a calm pool of water. The surface is bright and still. In your mind’s eye, watch what happens as you take a pebble and drop it into the center of the pool. As the small stone impacts the water, it causes a crater, then an upward geysering effect as the liquid rushes into the opening. This is similar to the individual’s impact upon and activity in the hobby of role-playing games. From the central point-the point of impact-concentric circles move outward. This ripple effect represents the areas of activity that spread outward from the individual. Larger effort is synonymous with a bigger pebble. The circles will be stronger and spread farther before disappearing. Here is an overview of this effect:



It is certainly apparent that to achieve greater mastery, individual excellence must come first. In this regard, the effort is more important than absolute results. The individual may not be the best player, but he knows what goes into the making of such an individual. Beyond that, and again noting that the striving individual need not be the best game master, there is excellence in both contribution to the play group and a complete understanding of the principles necessary to attain mastery. In order to progress beyond the two innermost circles, actual mastery must be demonstrated.

The third circle of mastery demonstrates to a broad audience that the individual has, in fact, gained mastery. Through sharing knowledge, the individual gains group acceptance. The group grants master status, as it were. Mastery is demonstrated through participation in tournaments and conventions. It is also shown in published materials that assist others in their playing of the game or understanding of rules, systems, and so forth. The greater the audience and its acceptance, the broader the degree of mastery demonstrated by the individual.

Finally, the fourth circle indicates the stage at which Grand Mastery is shown. There, contributions are aimed not at one particular role-playing game but at the gaming community. It is an extension of the third ring, in actuality, with the individual understanding the needs of all his fellow enthusiasts and contributing toward their ongoing enjoyment of the pursuit.

Another possible view requires that you envision a pyramid. This analogy is the converse of the one illustrated by the ripple effect: The people represented by the innermost and smallest circle are the same ones who comprise the base of the pyramid, its largest part. The individuals striving toward mastery are represented by the upper tiers of the base, which is comparable to the outermost section of the smallest circle. Next come those who have attained a degree of mastery. Their influence extends beyond the innermost circle to the next largest one, and in the pyramid they occupy the section which is adjacent to but elevated from the base.

The progression continues in this manner, moving up the **pyra-**



mid one step for every move outward on the circle diagram. The most exclusive groups of all are those represented by the largest circle and by the very top of the pyramid. In the former case, they can be thought of as the ones whose interest, involvement, and accomplishments had the farthest-reaching consequences. In the latter example, they are the people who had to work the hardest and climb the highest to attain the pinnacle of achievement in their pursuit.

Thus the circles show the striving of the individual and acknowledgment by the group as progress moves outward. The pyramid illustrates just how much effort, and how much group acceptance, is required to gain grand mastery. It is a goal worth striving for because it brings great personal satisfaction regardless of the end result. Success in Grand Mastery brings the greater satisfaction of knowing that a contribution has been made to a great number of your fellow role-playing-game enthusiasts. What more could one ask?

# APPENDICES

## **APPENDIX A** **Organizations and Regional Groups**

Players Association, TSR (UK) Ltd., The Mill, Rathmore Road,  
Cambridge, England CB1 4AD

Role Playing Game Association (RPGA) Network, P.O. Box 509, Lake  
Geneva WI 53147

(These two organizations are the only current nationwide ones serving  
the RPG community.)

Contact your local high school, college, or game store for the name and  
address of the local or regional group that is active in your area. There are  
numerous organizations of this sort that are active and most worthwhile.

## APPENDIX B

### Annual Conventions Featuring Role-Playing Games

**Gen Con Convention.** This is the first gaming convention ever established, dating from 1968. Contact TSR, Inc., P.O. Box 756, Lake Geneva WI 53147.

**Origins.** This convention is the nearest rival for national status to the Gen Con Convention. For information contact: Game Manufacturers Association of America (GAMA), do Mr. Rich Banner, Game Designers Workshop, P.O. Box 1646, Bloomington IL 61701.

AtlantaCon\*

Dallas Con\*

Dragon Con, Ed Kramer, Box 148, Clarkston GA 30021

DunDraCon\*

Games Day, Games Workshop, **Chewton** St., Hilltop, Eastwood, Nottingham, England

Games Fair, TSR (UK), Ltd., The Mill, Rathmore Road, Cambridge, England

MichiCon\*

OrcCon\*

WinterCon\*

\*These and quite a few other conventions tend to be more regional in nature than those for which addresses are given. Dates and addresses can be found in the convention listing common to most professional periodicals serving the gaming community.

**APPENDIX C**  
**Professional Periodicals Serving**  
**the Role-Playing-Game Community**

|                    |                                                                                                                                         |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Different Worlds   | Sleuth Publications, Ltd., 2814 19th Street,<br>San Francisco CA 94110                                                                  |
| Dragon Magazine    | TSR, Inc., PO. Box 110, Lake Geneva WI<br>53 147                                                                                        |
| VIP of Gaming, The | Diverse Talents, Inc., 5374 Village Road,<br>Long Beach CA 90808                                                                        |
| White Dwarf        | Games Workshop, Chesham St., Hilltop,<br>Eastwood, Nottingham, England. US<br>Information: 9110-F Red Branch Road,<br>Columbia MD 21045 |

Information on amateur publications can be obtained from reading professional publications or through gaming community sources such as local groups and conventions.

**APPENDIX D**  
**Role-Playing Games and Products Currently Available, Their**  
**Genres, and Their Publishers**

KEY TO GAME GENRE:

|    |                                                            |     |                                                |
|----|------------------------------------------------------------|-----|------------------------------------------------|
| A  | Accessory products for other RPG systems                   | FS  | Fantasy/fantastic science                      |
|    |                                                            | HIS | Historical base                                |
| AA | Action adventure—principally set in recent past or present | HFS | Historical fantasy/fantastic science           |
|    |                                                            | HOR | Horror                                         |
| C  | Comic book base                                            | PH  | Postholocaust—principally set in recent future |
| CB | Comic book fantastic heroes                                | SF  | Science fiction                                |
| E  | Espionage                                                  | TT  | Time travel                                    |
| F  | Fantasy                                                    |     |                                                |

Aftermath! (HFS) Fantasy Games Unlimited, PO. Box 182, Roslyn NY 11576\*

Advanced Dungeons & Dragons (F) TSR, Inc., PO. Box 756, Lake Geneva WI 53147

Bushido (HIS) Fantasy Games Unlimited

Call of Cthulhu (HOR) Chaosium Inc., PO. Box 6302, Albany CA 94706

Champions (CB) Hero Games, 92A 21st Avenue, San Mateo CA 94403

Chill (HOR) Pacesetter Ltd., PO. Box 451, Delavan WI 5311.5

Chivalry and Sorcery (HIS/F) Fantasy Games Unlimited

Compleat Fantasy Series (F) Bard Games, PO. Box 7429, Greenwich CT 06836

Daredevils (AA) Fantasy Games Unlimited

DC Heroes (CB) Mayfair Games Inc., P.O. Box 48539, Niles IL 60648

Doctor Who (FS) FASA Corp., P.O. Box 6930, Chicago IL 60680

Dungeons & Dragons (F) TSR, Inc.

Elfquest (F) Chaosium Inc.

Empire of the Petal Throne (F) Gamescience Inc., 1512 30th Avenue, Gulfport MS 39501

Fantasy Hero (F) Hero Games

Flashing Blades (HIS) Fantasy Games Unlimited

Gamma World (FS) TSR, Inc.

Gangbusters (AA) TSR, Inc.

Ghostbusters (FS/AA) West End Games Inc., 25 1 West 30th Street, New York NY 10001

Golden Heroes (CB) Games Workshop, 9110-F Red Branch Road, Columbia MD 21045

\*The addresses of companies and publications are given only at their first mention in this list.

Harn (F) Columbia Games Inc., PO. Box 8006, Blaine WA 98230

Heroes Unlimited (CB) Palladium Books, 5924-26 Lonyo, Detroit MI 48210

James Bond 007 (E) Victory Games Inc., 43 W. 33rd Street, New York NY 10001

**Jorune** (F) Sky Realms Publishing, PO. Box 5543, Berkeley CA 94705

Judge Dredd (FS) Games Workshop

Justice Inc. (AA) Hero Games

Loremaster (F) Iron Crown Enterprises Inc., PO. Box 1605, Charlottesville VA 22902

Lords of Creation (FS) The Avalon Hill Game Co., 4517 Harford Road, Baltimore MD 21214

Mad Dogs & Englishmen (HIS) Fantasy Games Unlimited

Marvel Super Heroes (CB) TSR, Inc.

**Merc** (C/AA) Fantasy Games Unlimited

Mercenaries, Spies & Private Eyes (AA) Blade/Flying Buffalo, PO. Box 1467, Scottsdale AZ 85252

Middle-Earth Role Playing (F) Iron Crown Enterprises Inc.

Morrow Project, The (TT) **Timeline** Ltd., PO. Box 60, Lansing MI 48197

Other Suns (SF) Fantasy Games Unlimited

Palladium Role-Playing Game (F) Palladium Books

Paranoia (FS) West End Games Inc.

Pendragon (F) Chaosium Inc.

Power & Perils (F) The Avalon Hill Game Co.

Privateers and Gentlemen (HIS) Fantasy Games Unlimited

Psi World (FS) Fantasy Games Unlimited

Ringworld (SF) Chaosium Inc.

Role Aids (A) Mayfair Games Inc.

Rolemaster (F) Iron Crown Enterprises Inc.

Runequest (F) The Avalon Hill Game Co.

Skull and Crossbones (HIS) Fantasy Games Unlimited

Space Master (SF) Iron Crown Enterprises Inc.

Space Opera (SF) Fantasy Games Unlimited

Star Ace (SF) Pacesetter Ltd.

Star Frontiers (SF) TSR, Inc.

Star Trek (SF) FASA Corp.

Stormbringer (F) Chaosium Inc.

Superhero 2044 (C/FS) Gamescience Inc.

Superworld (CB) Chaosium Inc.

Swordbearer (F) Fantasy Games Unlimited

**Timemaster** (TT) Pacesetter Ltd.

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (CB) Palladium Books

Toon (CB) Steve Jackson Games, PO. Box 18957, Austin TX 78760

Top Secret (E) TSR, Inc.

Traveller (SF) Game Designers' Workshop, PO. Box 1646, Bloomington IL 61701

Tunnels and Trolls (F) Blade/Flying Buffalo

Twilight: 2000 (PI-I/HIS) Game Designers' Workshop

Victorian Adventure (HIS/AA/HOR) SKS Distribution, 79 Hainton Avenue, Grimsby, South Humberside, England

Villains and Vigilantes (CB) Fantasy Games Unlimited

Wild West (HIS) Fantasy Games Unlimited

Note: This listing of games and publishers is not exhaustive, merely a reasonable survey of what is currently available from active publishers at the time of this writing. Changes are possible, and readers should determine for themselves the desirability of any game system.

## APPENDIX E

Glossary of Terms Used in This Work and in the Gaming  
community

**ability:** potential power, power, or skill of a game character or other creature within the game.

**adventure:** a complete episode of play that may take place over one or several **play** sessions.

**adventurer:** a player character or non-player character; the persona on a quest, mission, or case.

**alignment:** a term to cover the game-defined moral, ethical, and social perspectives of beings within the system. It is a device used both to promote role-playing and to create adversarial situations.

**APA:** abbreviation for “Amateur Press Association,” an informal label applied to a publication that consists of the collected material submitted by several writers who are associated with that publication. The collected work is then mailed to contributors and subscribers. An “**APAzine**” (short for “**APA** magazine”) differs from a professional magazine in that the former publication is usually obliged to print (and happy to have) any material submitted by someone affiliated with that publication, while **the** latter does not necessarily have such a legal or ethical obligation to anyone who sends in a manuscript.

**attribute:** one of a character’s basic characteristics (strength, intelligence, etc.). See **stats**.

**campaign:** **the** game master and players’ expression of a role-playing game; their particular interpretation of the milieu of that game. The game world is embodied in the campaign of each group.

**character:** an adventurer or other sentient being encountered or operating within the campaign. The term is often used to refer to a player character but can also refer to a non-player character if the context so indicates. See **persona**.

**class:** a defined character type or profession prescribed by the game rules. There will be certain specifics regarding a character of a class, and prescribed abilities and limitations included. The use of character classes of defined nature is not common in game systems that have skill selection on a broad basis.

**con:** short term for a convention; the term has been borrowed from science fiction fandom.



- core group: the most active and dedicated element of the whole, be it the larger gaming community, the adherents of a particular game system, or a specific campaign.
- D&D: appellation for the Dungeons & Dragons Medieval Fantasy Role Playing Game specifically. It is also used loosely to cover the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Game as well.
- DM: Dungeon Master, particularly the game master in a D&D or AD&D game campaign or tournament scenario.
- dweomer: another term for magic. From the archaic *Dweomer Craeft*.
- end: the purpose of play for a particular episode or saga within the campaign; the reason for the quest. In some cases, the end might not exist per se, the goal being simply to experience the overall game goal of enjoyment, but this is typical only of unplanned play sessions.
- episode: one or several play sessions, which has a given end and a specific reward for successful completion of the quest activity.
- experience: a game-articulated method for measuring the relative success of play sessions, as interpreted by the game master and awarded to players' characters in points accumulating toward the gaining of some increase in player character ability either automatically or by selection.
- fanzine: short term for "fan magazine," a term for an amateur publication borrowed from science fiction enthusiasts.
- FRP: abbreviation for "fantasy role-playing," a term used to encompass all role-playing games and their play.
- FRPG: abbreviation for "fantasy role-playing game."
- game system: the entirety of a game, including rules and extensions and adjunctive material thereto, which develops over a period of time beginning at the point the initial rules are published and might continue to expand thereafter for the life of the game.
- gaming community: in general, the whole of role-playing game enthusiasts, the publications that serve them, and those who are collaterally interested in the field through association with pursuit of similar games such as role assumption games and conflict simulation games.
- genre: the subject matter upon which a game system is based, for example, Victorian era detective fiction, science fiction, and fantasy.
- GM: abbreviation for "game master," the individual (or group) who oversees the campaign and each play session. Synonymous with DM generally. The term was borrowed from the enthusiasts pursuing the play of *the Diplomacy* game via mail.

**goal:** the overall reason for playing a given role-playing game (entertainment) as well as the reason(s) specified within the game for playing it.

**Grand Master:** an individual who has attained recognition of the gaming community for some outstanding achievement(s), after having gained mastery of one or more of the fields of role-playing gaming.

**HD:** abbreviation for “hit dice.” The strength of a being is often expressed as a number derived from the total of several rolls of dice, to be used to determine how many points of damage a creature can absorb from attacks before being killed. For instance, a being with 10 HD, assuming six-sided dice are rolled, would have 35 points on the average (since the average result of each single die roll is 3.5).

**HP:** abbreviation for “hit points.” The number of points of damage that can be absorbed by a being, whether or not determined by dice. Also the amount of damage delivered to a being through some form of attack. Thus a being with 35 hit points can easily absorb damage of 10 points from a hit by a weapon. The being would afterward be left with 25 hit points.

**HTK:** “hits to kill,” the total number of hit points or hits that will kill a being existing within the game.

**level:** (1) the degree of mastery of a subject, usually referring to playing or game mastering skill; (2) the difficulty factor of a game adventure, ranging from low to high, i.e., a low-level scenario or high-level one; (3) the measure of strength or skill of a game being, usually from a base of first level as lowest, going upward in level, or a like measurement of some profession, skill, power, or similar capability of a being or thing (such as a magic spell or other make-believe power); (4) comparative level of advancement in sociological or technological progress (chiefly in science fiction-based role-playing games); (5) a measure of depth of underground space, such as a dungeon complex, progressing from the least depth (first level) downward.

**master:** one who demonstrates the highest level of skill in a particular field of role-playing games. Fields include game mastering, play, article authorship, scenario design, campaign creation, and game authorship.

**milieu:** the entirety of the campaign world, including all beings, systems, orders, and things and their interactions and purposes. Also the genre as interpreted by a game system or by role-playing games broadly.

**module:** a printed adventure that provides the playing group with **back-**

ground information, maps, and data sufficient for the game master to conduct not just one but usually many sessions of play toward a quest completion, this end usually known and understood by the players.

monster: any being whose role in the game is adversarial to that of the player characters. An enemy person, creature, or thing.

NPC: abbreviation for “non-player character,” a game persona that appears in one or more sessions of play and is represented either by the game master or by a player (as a secondary character to his principal game persona).

objective: a conclusion to an entire campaign or a stage thereof; also a step toward game goals. See end and goal.

PC: abbreviation for “player character.” The role played by a player in a campaign or play session.

persona: the representation of an adventurer as played by a particular participant, usually synonymous with “character” or “player character.”

player: one who participates in a role-playing game through the creation and personification of a make-believe character that lives and operates within the game milieu.

playing group: the entire collection of participants in a campaign, including game master(s) and players.

profession: a specific set of requirements for a character in a game system, or a further definition of class. This distinction assists the rules in development of characters devised under them by defining and organizing abilities and skills.

quest: a search or adventure usually embodied in a form to encompass several sessions of play,

race: a game distinction to distinguish and vary the types of character roles possible within the system. Generally race is differentiated by the distinction “human” or “nonhuman,” with nonhuman including aliens, dwarves, elves, mutants, robots, and so forth. Sometimes race serves in the same form as class or profession as a means of defining and distinguishing characters from one another.

reward: the benefit attendant to completion of a quest or gained from overcoming some adversary or situation. In addition to monetary and equipment rewards, there is usually some experience factor award to enhance the player character.

role assumption: with respect to gaming, a type of game that prescribes the characteristics of the game persona to be played by participants

and has strict definitions of the scope and limitations of actions possible by the player character. Examples are multiple-choice game books and board games with so-called role-playing (actually role assumption) included in their rules.

**role-playing:** the term describing a game system that allows freedom of choice as to the type of character played, personalization of the player character, its actions, and its general activity. Typically, characters' actions in a role-playing game are limited only by very broad parameters, common sense, and imagination.

RPG: abbreviation for "role-playing game."

**saga:** a collection of related scenarios or episodes of play in a campaign that lead the team to a specific end.

scenario: synonymous with **adventure**.

**session:** a single period of game play, which may or may not have a conclusion. If it does have one, then it is typically called an **adventure** or a scenario, while if two or more sessions are required to fulfill a specified quest, it is an **episode**.

**SF:** abbreviation for "science fiction," a major genre of role-playing games.

**skill:** ability or knowledge in a specific category described by the rules of a game and specified or chosen by player characters within the game. Typical skill categories include scientific knowledge, weapons usage, languages, and so forth.

**spirit:** the announced or unarticulated reasons a game system exists in the form it does. In addition to entertainment, each game has a general approach that is subsumed in the whole of its material. If the spirit of the game system is altered, the whole then becomes meaningless.

**stats:** short term for "statistics." In the initial creation of a player character, each player must determine certain information regarding the mental and physical faculties of the game persona. The scores arrived at and maintained thereafter are the **attributes**, or stats, of the player character. Other beings have such information as well, prescribed by the game, by the game master, or the two in combination.

**target:** the purpose for play beyond sheer entertainment. If the group has no special quest, then it is seeking rewards from a target of opportunity, that is, an adventure through random activity. Otherwise the target will be specified as the reason for the quest.

**team:** the group of player characters, along with any associated **make-**

believe individuals, operating together to achieve their target. A party of adventurers. The game master is not a team member.

tournament: an organized role-playing-game competition in which competing teams are required to play through identical quests in a limited time period, with adjudication of a winning team, and possibly a single best player thereon, after one or more sessions of the tournament have been played. Some form of award or prize is usually included for winners.

zine: short term for a magazine, whether amateur or professional, that serves the gaming community or some other special-interest group.

## DISCOVER ULTIMATE ROLE-PLAYING MASTERY

Now for the first time Gary Gygax, co-creator of DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® and founder of TSR, Inc., reveals his tips, tactics and strategies for achieving true mastery in *all* role-playing games.

Whether you're a novice or an expert, *Role-Playing Mastery* has much to offer. You'll learn to:

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- improve group dynamics
- help your group accomplish its goals
- assess your opponents
- build a more exciting campaign
- and much more!

There are even tips on how to take pieces from different game systems and combine them into an entirely new game that's perfect for you and your group. Everything you need is here to take you from good to better to best!

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Gary Gygax is the co-creator of DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® and founder of TSR, Inc. He is also the author of the bestselling science fiction novels *Saga of the Old City* and *Artifact of Evil* and the co-producer of the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® cartoon show. Mr. Gygax lives in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin.

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