

Quarterly adventure role-playing aid

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Keeping magic magical
D&D then . . . and Next
The cosmology of RPGs



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CONTENTS

FEATURES

- 9 **The cosmology of role-playing games** - James Carpio illustrated by Alyssa Faden
Everything is interconnected – but how is it all related?
- 14 **Still playing after all these years** - Tim Kask illustrated by Barrie James
What Tim's *really* keeping behind that DM's screen
- 16 **Leomund's Secure Shelter** - Lenard Lakofka
AD&D, math, and magic items. What's better, +1 to damage or to hit?
- 18 **The ecology of the banshee** - Ronald Corn illustrated by Michał Kwiatkowski
If you hear her wail, it's already too late
- 22 **Bridging generations** - Luke Gygax
Stories fathers tell . . . and rediscover
- 23 **Gaming with a virtual tabletop** - Nevin P. Jones
Playing face to face when you can't be in the same place
- 24 **Keeping magic magical** - Dennis Sustare illustrated by Simon Adams
Liven up the magic in your game, whatever system you play
- 26 **Playing it the science fiction way** - James M. Ward illustrated by Barrie James
Disrupt your fantasy campaign with an unexpected twist
- 28 **DMing for your toddler** - Cory Doctorow illustrated by Hanae Ko
A four-year-old's first d20
- 30 **Great power for ICONS** - Steve Kenson illustrated by Jeff Dee
A preview of new power options for your superhero
- 32 **The future of tabletop gaming** - Ethan Gilsdorf illustrated by Ryan Browning
Polyhedral dice and paper maps in the twenty-first century
- 35 **The Gygax family storyteller** - Ernest Gary Gygax Jr.
When your father is Gary Gygax, storytime is special indeed
- 36 **Talents off the front line** - Dennis Detwiler illustrated by Nicola Jane Bradley
In *Godlike*, WWII also saw Talents at home and behind enemy lines
- 38 **D&D past, now, and Next** - Michael Tresca illustrated by Diesel
There's more to converting between editions than just the numbers

SPECIAL ATTRACTION

- 41 **Gnatdamp: A sanctuary in the swamp** - Michael Curtis illustrated by Peter Mullen
A village to flee to when you've nowhere else to turn

THE KOBOLD'S CAVERN

- 50 **Magical Miscellany** - Randall Hurlburt
A variety of magic items for *AGE*
- 52 **An AGE of great inventions** - Rodrigo Garcia Carmona
Try a more scientific approach with the Inventor talent
- 54 **Scaling combat feats** - Marc Radle
An alternative to the 'feat chain' model for *Pathfinder*

COMICS

- 60 **Marvin the Mage** - Jim Wampler
- 63 **What's New with Phil & Dixie** - Phil Foglio
- 64 **The Order of the Stick** - Rich Bulew

COVER: "Still Unlucky" by Daniel Horne

FROM ALL OF US

Welcome, and thank you. It's 2013, and you just bought a *print* magazine. Print! Wasn't that supposed to disappear, along with land-line telephones, broadcast television, wristwatches, and Twinkies? Not just that, but you bought a magazine. A magazine about games that you don't play on a computer. Things are not looking good for you, my friend – you're living in the past. Rolling dice? Sitting at a table, actually looking at the other players? Painting your own miniatures?

Of course, some of you are thinking, "wait, I'm reading this on my iPad, I didn't buy the print version." Maybe you don't roll dice anymore, since you got a dice-rolling app for your smartphone. You might use online character generators, or carry all your game books on a Kindle. Maybe you don't even play in the same room with your friends since you started using a virtual tabletop to connect with each other online.

However you play games, whichever games you play, *Gygax* magazine wants to help you get the most out of them. We believe that the adventure gaming hobby isn't about what technology you do or don't use – it's about playing games that require imagination, creativity, and strategy. It's about playing with other people, sharing an experience and creating memories. Most of all, it's about the human element. It's about being able to come up with an off-the-wall idea that isn't covered in the rules, and figuring out how to make it work on the fly. It's about rulings for unexpected situations, making up house rules that only your gaming group uses, arguing over whether a cleric can use a spiked mace, the rate of fire for an arquebus, or how many space marines can fit in a landing pod.

The name *Gygax* is our way of letting you know that we care about the history of adventure gaming, and that we believe in its future. Luke and Ernie Gygax literally grew up with the hobby. Their contributions to gaming reach all the way back to the beginning, yet both are keeping things fresh today, playtesting new games, running Gary Con, and of course, helping to create *Gygax* magazine. They are carrying on the family tradition by continuing to look to the future. We will cover games from all eras, including old editions and out-of-print classics, but also the latest offerings that are coming off the presses (or the PDF generators) today. Whatever the genre, however big or small the publisher, if it's a wonderful game that brings people together to use their imaginations, we care about it.

This first issue sees some familiar old names, and some exciting new ones. We've got material that reaches back to some of the earliest role-playing games, and some of the absolutely newest. Virtual tabletops, fantasy miniatures rules for toddlers, complicated mathematical answers to simple questions, even a city in a swamp . . . we've got it all here. If there's one question that's come up more than any other while we were making this magazine, it's been "what are you going to write about?" From here on out, we would like to direct a similar question at our readers. What would you like to read? Drop us a line and let us know. With your help, we want to see tabletop gaming thrive and expand. Let's look for new adventures together.

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The cosmology of role-playing games

by James Carpio

The intent of this article is not to begin a new-age diatribe about how all games are related, nor is it an attempt to tie game mechanics to a common origin. All of the magazine articles and reference books on RPG history from the past three decades agree on one thing: it all started with *Dungeons & Dragons*. While this notion is grounded in truth for the most part, to say all games grow from the *D&D* “Big Bang” discredits the other game designers who, for the most part, created new and different ways to play a role-playing game. In illustrating the relationship between some games, this article is meant to give perspective into how each generation of games influenced design.

So on to the RPG cosmos...

For this exercise let’s break down our gaming cosmos into several different galaxies. As we examine each galaxy we will find that there is a core concept at its center, although games begin to evolve and break away from that concept even as they maintain some of the design goals. Ultimately, like Ouroboros eating his tail, our cosmos comes full circle as we return back to *D&D* (well, its core mechanic anyway) and the *d20 System*’s powerful influence on current game design and publishing.

Lists by their nature must be incomplete, and so ours shall be here. An attempt to include every role-playing game ever created would be impractical, as some games will be too obscure, too hard to classify as RPGs, or even as distinct and separate games. The text of this article includes some of the most notable titles, and the illustration on pages 10 and 11 goes into greater detail still. With that proviso in mind, let’s begin our journey.

Alpha Prime — *Dungeons & Dragons*

In the beginning there was Dungeons & Dragons...

While there are many who would argue this fact, commercially *D&D* was it. Gary Gygax’s wood grain boxes, first sold by mail order in

1974 out of his home in Wisconsin, introduced many to the idea of playing make believe at the dining room table with a couple of dice, pencil, paper, and imagination. *D&D* was the Big Bang for our hobby; it was the sun and the center of all creation. It set the standard for role-playing games for years to come. From this simple design all commercial RPGs had attributes for measures of aptitude, hit points to see how much damage the character could take, and dice rolls for resolution (a throwback to the game’s wargaming heritage). The ideas of killing the monster, taking its treasure, and gaining power in the form of class and levels transformed most of the games in this galaxy. Based on this core design other games followed and branched off from the center star:

Empire of the Petal Throne (1975)
Boot Hill (1975)
Metamorphosis Alpha (1976)
Gamma World (1978)
Advanced Dungeons & Dragons (1977–1979)
Top Secret (1980)
Star Frontiers (1982)

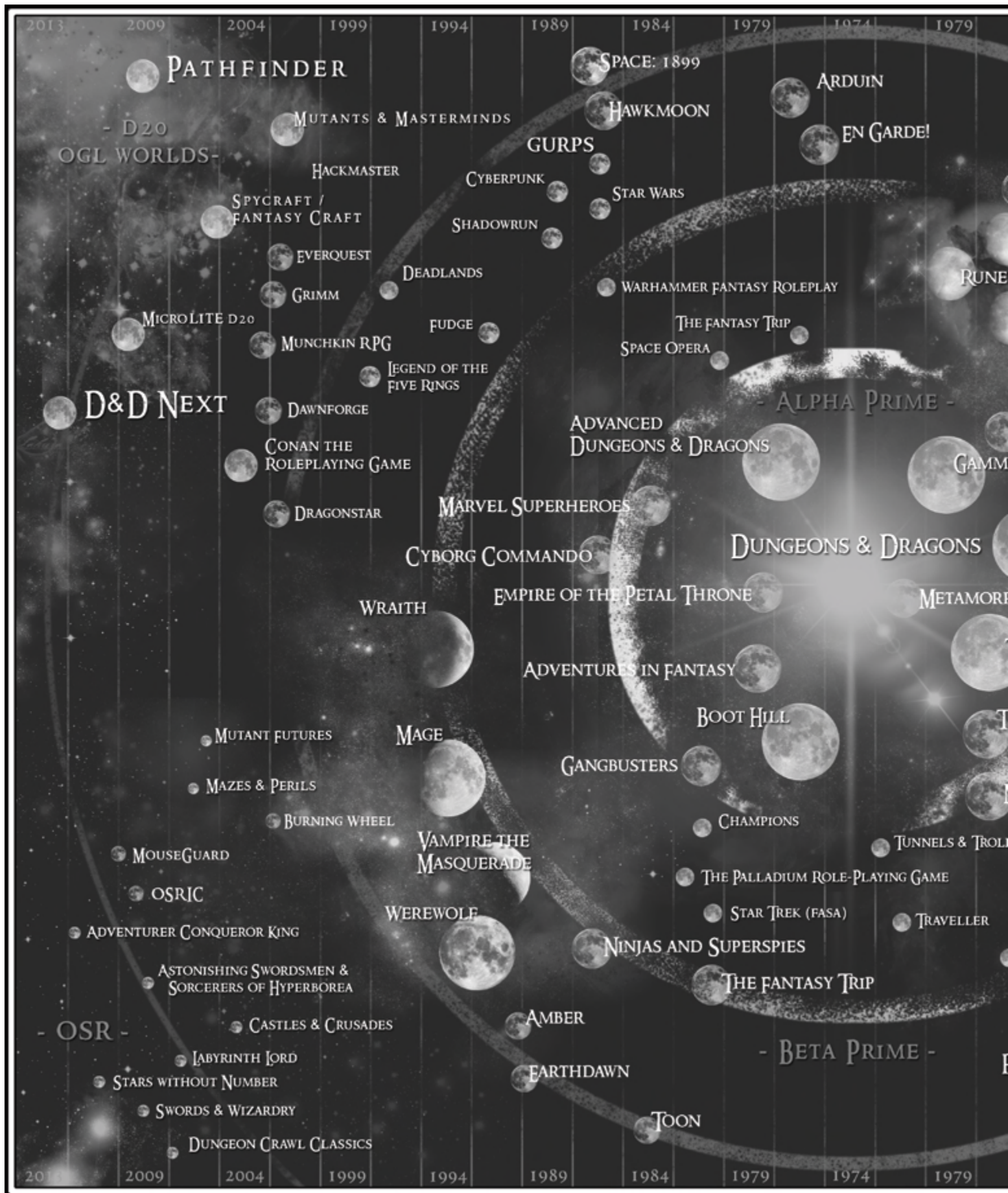
Alpha Prime, however does not belong entirely to the *D&D* (TSR) family of games. Others appeared shortly thereafter, and while branching off from the *D&D* core mechanic became their own entities and moved further away from the core design. Most of these games went in separate directions offering gamers completely new content and styles of play, while some remained faithful to the core concepts of *D&D* and offered additional options.

Tunnels & Trolls (FLYING BUFFALO, 1975)
Arduin (GRIMOIRE GAMES, 1977)
Traveller (GDW, 1977)
RuneQuest (1978)
The Fantasy Trip (METAGAMING CONCEPTS, 1980)
Rolemaster (IRON CROWN ENTERPRISES, 1980)
Space Opera (FANTASY GAMES UNLIMITED, 1980)

Call of Cthulhu (1981)
Champions (HERO GAMES, 1981)
Stormbringer (1981)
Thieves’ World (CHAOSIUM, 1981)
Star Trek (FASA, 1982)
James Bond 007 (VICTORY GAMES, 1983)
The Palladium Role-Playing Game (PALLADIUM GAMES, 1983)
Middle-Earth Role Playing (IRON CROWN ENTERPRISES, 1984)
Twilight 2000 (GDW, 1984)
Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay (GAMES WORKSHOP, 1986)

Beta Prime — second wave

By the 1990s role-playing games began to take a sudden turn in design. No longer did games remain faithful to the *D&D* design; new ideas began to take shape from those gamers and hobbyists who ventured away from Alpha Prime to expand and create their own games. The second wave followed a different philosophy from that which inspired them. In Beta Prime we begin to see an evolutionary step forward towards story and plot driven mechanics, leaving behind the wargaming legacy that formed the core of our home world Alpha Prime. This is not to say that games like *Call of Cthulhu* did not introduce these concepts ten years earlier, but the mechanics for these early pioneers still gave homage to *D&D* design fundamentals. The second wave gave us mechanics that lacked random charts, static resources such as gold-based economy systems, or rolling 3d6 for each attribute to generate numbers from 3–18. To give an example of such design and innovation, the core system for this galaxy will be White Wolf’s *Vampire the Masquerade*. To be fair, there are systems that came before it which began the snowballing effect, but it was White Wolf that really changed the tide. The Storyteller system brought much needed new design concepts such as point-based character generation (not that point-buy systems were anything new in game design, but they had





not been popular amongst the games in Alpha Prime), resources based on abstracts, and the much-needed unified die mechanic.

Games that followed in the second wave built on these concepts, broke away from wargame-based design, and introduced more and more abstract mechanics. A few examples would be *Deadlands*' poker-deck mechanic, *Fudge*'s "fudge die" and pyramid skill structure (which removed the idea of attributes altogether), or John Wick's innovative roll/keep system for *Legend of the Five Rings*.

Beta-Prime core worlds

Paranoia (WEST END GAMES, 1984)
D6 system/Star Wars (WEST END GAMES, 1986)
GURPS (STEVE JACKSON GAMES, 1986)
Cyberpunk (R. TALSORIAN GAMES, 1988)
Shadowrun (FASA, 1989)
Amber (PHAGE PRESS, 1991)
Vampire / Storyteller System (WHITE WOLF, 1991)
Fudge (GREY GHOST PRESS, 1992)
Deadlands (PINNACLE ENTERTAINMENT, 1996)
Legend of the Five Rings (AEG, 1997)

Gamma Prime – third wave

The Gamma Prime galaxy gets difficult to explain without a huge nod to the rim worlds of Indie-Minor. This is not to say that the games that surround and populate Gamma Prime have their own evolutionary paths, but many of the games here have been heavily inspired by indie games whose design goals completely disconnected themselves from the previous two galaxies. To quickly try and define indie design is like trying to quickly give a lesson on quantum physics. While I am sure it can be done, it would eventually leave too many questions unanswered. The best way to categorize an indie game is to use the word "abstract"; indie design breaks all traditional molds and creates games that are custom-built around concept, instead of a mechanic with a setting placed on top. The founding fathers of the indie movement—Ron Edwards (*Sorcerer*, *Troll Babe*), Robin D. Laws (*Hero Quest*, *Feng Shui*, *Over the Edge*), and Jared Sorensen (*OctaNe*, *Inspectors*)—have influenced the way in which games of Gamma Prime were designed. This is not to say that traditional role-playing games are not part of this unique galaxy. Games such as Hero Games' *Fuzion* or Eden Studios' *Unisystem* have their loyal fan base, but in this third wave we were given games that not only challenged our gamist abilities, but challenged our inner narrativist in order to give us a role-playing experience that was outside the conventional boundaries. Gamma Prime does not have a true center (although one could argue for several games that could take this coveted spot); the worlds that make up this last galaxy are constantly changing orbit and evolving, some even forming newer worlds around the old.

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Gamma-Prime core worlds

Cortex / Cortex Plus (MARGARET WEIS PRODUCTIONS, 2005 / 2010)
Unisystem (EDEN STUDIOS, 2003)
Fate (EVIL HAT, 2003)
Savage Worlds (GREAT WHITE GAMES/PINNACLE ENTERTAINMENT, 2003)
PDQ (ATOMIC SOCK MONKEY, 2003)
Gumshoe (PELGRANE, 2012)
ORE (ARC DREAM PUBLISHING, 2002)
Warhammer 40K (FANTASY FLIGHT GAMES, 2008)
ICONS (ADAMANT ENTERTAINMENT, 2010)

Indie-Minor worlds

Dogs in the Vineyard (LUMPLEY GAMES, 2004)
Sorcerer (ADEPT PRESS, 2002)
Kill Puppies for Satan (LUMPLEY GAMES, 2002)
Apocalypse World (LUMPLEY GAMES, 2010)
Breaking the Ice (BLACK AND GREEN GAMES, 2005)
Dread (THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM, 2006)
Burning Wheel (2002)
octa.Ne (MEMENTO MORI, 2003)

Satellite worlds and moons

While not truly galaxies of their own accord, the following games deserve honorable mention to illustrate how game design eventually comes full circle. These systems are referred to as satellites and moons because they are offshoots of designs and concepts from all three major galaxies. By no means should it be implied that these games are not original or that they do not deserve recognition, but, in regards to design, they share more in common with their parent system of *Dungeons & Dragons*. The satellites sprang from the core of the Open Gaming License (OGL), derived from *D&D 3.0*. Wizards of the Coast (WotC) proposed that the core mechanics of *D&D* would become open source and allow for third-party publishers to create their own unique content. While this brought a lot of great supplements (and new games) to the shelves of the gaming public, it also brought into existence second-rate and badly-written drivel. As WotC tightened the reins on what could be published through the OGL, other companies (such as Green Ronin) took the development of *d20* to the next level by revamping the core mechanics and bringing about games such as *True 20* and *Mutants & Masterminds*. By 2008, when WotC dropped the OGL to focus more on the GSL (Gaming System License: an attempt to create an open license with more control over content) and *D&D 4th Edition*, Paizo publishing (former publishers of *Dragon* and *Dungeon* magazines) continued to develop under the OGL and published *Pathfinder*, a streamlined version of the old 3.x *D&D* with a larger fan base than WotC might have anticipated.

OGL Worlds

Pathfinder (PAIZO, 2009)
Mutants & Masterminds (GREEN RONIN, 2002)
Spycraft / Fantasy Craft (CRAFTY GAMES, 2005)
MicroLITE d20 (KOBOLD ENTERPRISES, 2008)

D&D Next (WIZARDS OF THE COAST, 2012)

The OGL has, within the past five years, also sparked what is being called the "OSR" or Old School Renaissance. The OSR combines the resurging interest in the playing of older edition games and combining them with the open source licensing of the OGL. This freedom of the open content allows newer "retro-clones" such as *Swords & Wizardry*, *Labyrinth Lord*, and *Lamentations of the Flame Princess* to present the market with games that are compatible with out-of-print, older editions of *D&D* – games that can no longer be bought through commercial means, and may run a good price on Amazon or eBay. OSR games have recently gone beyond *D&D* emulation, inspiring role-playing games such as *Mutant Futures* and *Stars Without Number* that bring the play and feel of some of the older games (*Gamma World* and *Traveller*, in the example given) and use a familiar unified mechanic, *d20*. Where our journey began with *D&D*, it now returns.

The moons of the OSR

Dungeon Crawl Classics (GOODMAN GAMES, 2012)
Swords & Wizardry (MYTHMERE GAMES, 2008)
Labyrinth Lord (GOBLINOID GAMES, 2007)
Castles & Crusades (TROLL LORD GAMES, 2004)
Stars Without Number (SINE NOMINE GAMES, 2010)
Astonishing Swordsmen & Sorcerers of Hyperborea (NORTH WIND ADVENTURES, 2012)
Adventurer Conqueror King (AUTARCH, 2011)

"What about my favorite game? Where does it fit?"

There are many great games that could be added to the lists (galaxies) above and it could be argued that those listed might be a better fit elsewhere. The examples shown here are meant to give the reader a guideline of RPG design history and a better understanding of how these games might relate to each other in mechanic design and theory.

By looking at the time frame in which a game was created it is easier to make that connection.

First wave: 1974–1989

Second wave: 1990–2002

Third wave: 2002–now

Granted, this cannot be the only factor to take into consideration. R. Talsorian's *Castle Falkenstein RPG* (published in 1991) easily fits into the third wave of design, and some would say that *CF* was one of the first true indie-style games on the market. Robin Laws' *Feng Shui* is another example of innovative game design, published years before the Forge philosophy made its way into the mainstream. The gaming cosmos is vast – amongst the planets and moons you can find new wonders and new experiences, ready to have you break out the dice bag. Be warned, brave explorers, the cosmos is not interminable – when you think you have found something new, you just might find that you have arrived back at the beginning. ■

Still playing after all these years

by Tim Kask

A long, long time ago, at the beginning of the Roleplaying Age, I was asked by a lady writer, in regard to this new “Dungeons game thing”, and I paraphrase here from faulty memory, “just what is it you DO to play this game?”

For a while, before the Periodicals Division, all three of us “switched hats” from time to time at TSR. We rotated responsibilities, one of which was rudimentary PR as TSR and *D&D* started attracting attention. It so happened that I “had the duty” when this woman reached out to us, and made an appointment for her to come by my office in the old grey house on Main. I do not remember her name; I do recall that she wrote for a Midwestern newspaper but I do not recall getting a tear sheet afterwards, so I assume she never sold her editor on the story.

During the course of the interview, I came up with an analogy that Gary and I later used many times. As it came to me, it crystallized several aspects of my own gaming. Call it a revelation, call it an inspiration or call it a perception, I first put my finger on what I find so appealing about roleplaying when I uttered

my answer. It’s the story, stupid! (Me being the “stupid.”)

I told that hopeful young lady that the best way I could explain it was this: The DM is like an author. He creates a general story idea and thinks up some interesting plot lines and ideas which he turns into a rough outline. He then assembles a cast of characters that somewhat define themselves. Once that is done he feeds them several tidbits of information in the form of rumors and clues and waits to see which bait they find most enticing. Once they have selected a “plot path” (which will be ever shifting), he sits back and watches his story unfold as filled in by the players, all the while teasing them with additional plot twists in the form of more juicy rumors and legends. I thought she “got it,” but apparently her editor didn’t. Some years later, my analogy would have been much more complex.

When we run a campaign, we write an opus. When we run a one-off at a convention, we write a short story. “We” is defined as the DM and all the players at the table.

As DMs, we must shift from writer to editor. We snip here, we write in a little there, all in

the interest of keeping it fun while it tacks and runs its way to whatever sandy shore it is destined to wash up on.

My first campaign started in October of 1974 and ran until July or August of 1975. We played about six or seven times a month, for anywhere from four to eight hours in a stretch; our average was about 12 hours a week. We wrote a lot of story. What began as an introductory dungeon crawl (sort of like “Let’s go killing at the zoo”) evolved into the Kwalishar Campaign. Each chapter wrote itself, some chapters happened spontaneously, but we trekked on after the underlying goal, the Laboratory of Kwalish. How we got there is a story for another time.

In recent years I have had the great good fortune to be a guest at several cons around the eastern half of the country (east of the Rockies). This has afforded me the opportunity to meet dozens of players and run lots of games. From this regimen, I have discovered two things that keep me coming back, and both involve the story.

As I have written only a rather limited num-



ber of adventures up to this point, I have to run the same ones at different cons and try to make sure that no player that has signed up for a particular adventure has played in it previously. (More on that later.) I should also point out that I provide a large stable of pre-generated characters, always more than needed. This provides for different party compositions on its own, with no interference on my part.

The interesting thing about running the same adventures multiple times is that the story written by each group is always different, sometimes radically so. A word on con-playing behavior is in order here – with no long-term investment in pre-generated characters, con players tend to die off at an alarming rate at my table. That said, they continue to find different and amusing ways to achieve that glorious end.

The actual author of the ensuing story is what I call the hive-mind. In all good game sessions, the hive-mind appears. At some point from your vantage on the friendly side of the screen you will begin to notice that six are now seemingly able to think as eight, or even more. Now is that time that all great DMs shine, and lesser ones get run over roughshod. The person behind the screen (New terminology? Instead of DM, GM, CK, etc., could we use PbtS?) soon finds himself trying to outwit and out-think a whole mob of players. To use a teaching example, I would use class size. Fielding questions from 16 students is infinitely easier than doing the same in a room with 25; there is some sort of group dynamic at play that encourages the members of the bigger class to think farther afield and in more detail. The same happens in roleplaying.

As the PbtS, I am constantly delighted every time a hitherto soft-spoken and seemingly reticent player speaks up with the proper observation or is the player that makes the leap of intuition that enables them to discern the truth of the moment.

Very often, those parties that survive achieve at least some of the goals set forth on the adventure. The fact that they manage to do it in so many varied and amusing ways, I find marvelous.

For hard-core, serious-as-dirt story-spinning, nothing beats what I refer to as an “extemp adventure.” Quite frankly, and with no inference of braggadocio, not every PbtS can pull it off. To do it you must be confident in your skills to the point of cockiness, you must have no social phobias whatsoever, and you must have the total concentration of the players at all times. To be honest, I only know a handful that might pull this off and all of them have years and years of experience. To explain what I am babbling about, let me give two instances as example.

I had promised to run a private game for a good friend and a few of his buddies one evening at a con where I was a guest. In the weeks leading up to it I was so damned busy that I

kept pushing off my promise. It got so bad that I found myself on the plane heading west and realized I was not ready. Through repeated bugging, my buddy had learned that the bunch of them had been hired for a task, had failed and now were doomed to a sudden and violent end unless they made amends. I had brought along a preliminary map of my city, and had some extra pre-gens in my briefcase for some 5th and 6th level sellswords.

I gave them the briefest of briefings: “You were hired by this big scary/powerful dude to guard his stuff. The stuff got stolen while you were supposed to be guarding. He is really ticked-off. You will die soon if you don’t get his stuff back.” They went into the strong-room and found a tunnel coming up underneath his most prized possession—the last known barrel of Longbottom Leaf – Old Toby.

At that point I literally pointed at each one, in turn, at the table and asked, “What are you doing?”, “What are you doing?” and so on. By the time I got around the table, I had answers/results for the others. If one said he was going to snoop around the bazaars for word of the Old Toby, he learned that none had been available for any price, from “any” source for a long time, but if anyone might know, it might be that weird tobacconist in the Gnomes Quarter, if he was home, and if he wanted to talk . . . you get the picture? From that point on, the story was completely out of my hands

and being written solely by the choices of the players. And believe me when I say they did some really weird stuff. And also believe me when I tell you that if you try this, make sure one is a paladin or similarly annoying goody-two-shoes. If you don’t, you may find that you have a loosed a bunch of thugs upon the city, strong-arming and torturing for information. (The ethical and moral conundrums that the knowledge that those lovely coins with which you were paid, and now cannot remove from your person, and will soon explode with the force of three fireballs, will cause is a mirror of human nature.) When I revealed four and a half hours of fun later that I had nothing “behind the screen,” they were flabbergasted.

Last year at TotalCon I found myself in a similar situation; at least one person signed up had played in every adventure I had brought. So I made a great show of rooting through my papers and announcing that I “found one nobody has played in.” We then set out to do the same adventure, although this was a larger party, as I had done before: extemporaneously. We had a ball; they did different things and had different encounters in the same city. When I flipped over my screen and they saw the bare table behind it, they were freaked out.

It was the same story outline but the results were arrived at in hugely different ways. We had great gobs of fun doing it both times, and isn’t that what this all really about? The Fun?

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By Lenard Lakofka

A moment of indulgence:

I decided not to do Leomund's Tiny Hut again but instead, Leomund's Secure Shelter, because protection and comfort were key principles of Leomund the Blue, my character from so long ago.

Where have I been since writing a column for the *Dragon* so many years ago? Even after the change of management at TSR I continued to DM in Long Beach, CA up until 1995 or so. Then I dabbled in various online projects, most recently getting L4, "Devilspawn," published by Dragonsfoot about a year ago. L5, "An Unexpected Gate," will come from the same publisher this fall.

Besides *AD&D*, I played bridge for seven years and got my Life Master award at the Las Vegas Nationals, placing 2nd in the Grand National Teams' C division. All those Black, Red, Silver and Gold points! When I got my first hundred points I thought I knew everything. When I got to 200 I realized I didn't know a whole lot.

Like many *AD&D* players, alas, I was overweight. 340 pounds was the worst. I got diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol. I should be dead. Three years ago I began a 12-step program, and now I am down to 250! I have walked three half-marathons, and believe me, if I can do it, you can too (with your doctor's blessing and some training).

Currently I'm building a N Scale model railroad. (I need much smaller fingers for this!)

And now for the *AD&D* babble. I'll be brief this time.

Back in the good old days of *Dungeons & Dragons*, when the whole game came in a box with three books and there were no polyhedral dice, I started to DM. It became clear quickly that many things about the game and the mechanics had some gaps that you could fly a family of seven red dragons through.

Problem one was getting it through your head that *D&D* was not a simulation of hand-to-hand combat. There were no hit locations, no matter whether the player said, "I fire at his left eye," or, "I try to cut his hand off." That didn't matter. Damage was damage was damage and we did not have to discuss missing

eyeballs, ears, legs, and sundry other parts.

Problem two was death. When did you die? Was death at zero hit points? If you did that you'd be dicing up new characters twice in each gaming session. So as DM you had to determine when death did occur, and how low could you go without dying. I decided on -4 hit points. After -4, all bets were off and you might die instantly (as corrected for your constitution — that score had to be for something). I believe there is a chart in one of my articles for *The Dragon*. [*Leomund's Tiny Hut*, *The Dragon* #31, Nov. 1979 -ed.]

D&D becomes AD&D

As time passed and *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* was being written I was lucky enough to get the double-spaced typed copies of both the *Dungeon Masters Guide* and the *Players Handbook* for my comments. All of these days and weeks of making rulings (I had a book of rulings that was just over a hundred pages) might actually pay off.

Once the project was done—about two months of reading and a few live sessions with Gary Gygax—I ended up with about 25 pages in the *DMG* and *PH*. Don't ask me which pages because I didn't keep all of the stuff when I moved from Chicago to California.

All of this proofreading brought me to the realization that being a DM is an art form. At one of the Gen Cons in Wisconsin I discovered a button that said "Lawful Neutral," and I decided that that was my basic philosophy. I was not a member of the party and I did give the monster an even break. If the party did everything right but got smashed by bad die rolls I might try to save one or two of them (my one vice). I only buried the entire party at conventions when I would DM a few games.

The DM, whether old or new, just has to create a mindset that the books are only guides. The DM has the final ability to rule and conduct the game. If something a player wants to do is outlandish, give it a 3 – 8% chance of success, but if it's well thought out and doable make it 75 – 90%. In those cases, where it is not a sure call in the DM's mind, let the dice be the good guy or the villain. Tell the party what chance you are giving the action

and then roll the dice on the table where they can see the roll. It adds to the fun and excitement.

When the DM makes a ruling he/she has to, at least partially, vindicate the decision if asked. He or she also should keep the ruling so that if this happens again he (I'm going to stop saying he/she with no intention to offend anyone) has a guideline. He can change his mind with time.

Let's take an example from a recent game. The party was fighting three manticores. The text says that the manticore can fire its twenty-four spikes in volleys of six each. Does that make sense? I chose to roll d6 +2 per round of spike fire instead of mindlessly firing exactly six spikes per round.

Ages ago I thought, if a fighter gets a blow every other round at seventh level, what led to this ability at that particular promotion? I ruled that a person with the knowledge of a weapon for a full "level promotion" (before the days of weapon specialization) could have a chance at a second blow at 2nd level. 10% at 2nd, 20% at 3rd, 30% at 4th, etc. I went so far as to give this chance to clerics and thieves as well. 4% increments for clerics and 2% increments for thieves. Naturally when the party gets a gift like that, all of the other humans and demi-humans (and humanoids) get that advantage too. Remember the part about giving the monster an even break?

The list can, of course, go on and on and on. The spell *Leomund's Endless Belaborment* was written *about* me, not by me. One of those things I loved Uncle Gary so much for doing! Finally, one more interesting (I hope) topic.

AD&D, math, and magic items

Having killed the nasty ogre, your party is due for some reward. The knight offers you a longsword that is +1 to hit (but no damage bonus) or one that is +1 to damage (but not to hit). They are both "magic" when it comes to hitting things like gargoyles. Which one should you choose?

Quickly now! He's only giving you one minute to decide, or you get nothing. Tick-tock, tick-tock!

Let's look at the math, and decide which is

better, a magic sword that is +1 to hit, or one that does +1 damage.

We can calculate the average damage of a weapon per attack with this formula:

$$.05 \times (21 - THAC0) \times ((\text{upper damage range} + \text{lower damage range}) / 2) = \text{average damage}$$

That's 5%—the odds of any number coming up on a d20—times the likelihood of that number indicating a hit, multiplied by the weapon's average damage.

So let's say the THAC0 for the +1 to-hit sword is 17, meaning the THAC0 for the +1 to-damage sword is 18.

The longsword does 1-8 points of damage.

+1 to-hit longsword:

$$.05 \times (21 - 17) \times ((8 + 1) / 2) = .9 \text{ points of damage from the average attack.}$$

+1 to-damage longsword:

$$.05 \times (21 - 18 \times ((9 + 2) / 2)) = .825 \text{ points of damage from the average attack.}$$

Then if your character's THAC0 is 11:
 $.05 \times (21 - 11) \times ((8 + 1) / 2) = 2.25 \text{ points of damage per attack.}$

$.05 \times (21 - 12) \times ((9 + 2) / 2) = 2.475 \text{ points of damage.}$

Oh. It's not that simple, is it?

If you are fighting opponents with a great armor class you want +1 to hit, but if you are fighting crappy armor class opponents the extra damage is better.

Which is more likely? Which just might save your ass in a long melee?

The answer is simple. **Take the +1 to damage now**, and seek a +1 to hit *and* +1 to damage soon!

The chart is below.

+1 to hit				+1 to damage				Difference
Chance to hit	Average damage	20 rounds	Chance to hit	Average damage	20 rounds			
5%	4.5	0.225	4.5	5.5*	0.275*	5.5*	1	
10%	4.5	0.45	9	5%	5.5	0.275	5.5	-3.5 †
15%	4.5	0.675	13.5	10%	5.5	0.55	11	-2.5 †
20%	4.5	0.9	18	15%	5.5	0.825	16.5	-1.5 †
25%	4.5	1.125	22.5	20%	5.5	1.1	22	-0.5 †
30%	4.5	1.35	27	25%	5.5	1.375	27.5	0.5
35%	4.5	1.575	31.5	30%	5.5	1.65	33	1.5
40%	4.5	1.8	36	35%	5.5	1.925	38.5	2.5
45%	4.5	2.025	40.5	40%	5.5	2.2	44	3.5
50%	4.5	2.25	45	45%	5.5	2.475	49.5	4.5
55%	4.5	2.475	49.5	50%	5.5	2.75	55	5.5
60%	4.5	2.7	54	55%	5.5	3.025	60.5	6.5
65%	4.5	2.925	58.5	60%	5.5	3.3	66	7.5
70%	4.5	3.15	63	65%	5.5	3.575	71.5	8.5
75%	4.5	3.375	67.5	70%	5.5	3.85	77	9.5
80%	4.5	3.6	72	75%	5.5	4.125	82.5	10.5
85%	4.5	3.825	76.5	80%	5.5	4.4	88	11.5
90%	4.5	4.05	81	85%	5.5	4.675	93.5	12.5
95%	4.5	4.275	85.5	90%	5.5	4.95	99	13.5
100%	4.5	4.5	90	95%	5.5	5.225	104.5	14.5

THAC0 is calculated here without any strength bonuses. THAC0 is not for a specific class or level, so this applies to any class.

*Recall that 20 always hits

† The +1 to hit weapon is only "better" on average in a very narrow range

Naturally, good or bad luck can change everything, *these are just averages!*

The ecology of the BANSHEE

by Ronald Corn

*From Loughmoe to yellow Dunanore
There was fear; the traders of Tralee
Gathered up their golden store,
And prepared to flee;
For, in ship and hall from night till morning,
Showed the first faint beamings of the sun,
All the foreigners heard the warning
Of the Dreaded One!
"This," they spake, "portendeth death to us,
If we fly not swiftly from our fate!"
Self-conceited idiots! Thus
Ravingly to prate!
Not for base-born higgling Saxon trucksters
Ring laments like those by shore and sea!
Not for churls with souls like hucksters
Wailth our Banshee!*

A LAMENTATION
FOR THE DEATH OF SIR
MAURICE FITZGERALD,
KNIGHT, OF
KERRY, WHO WAS
KILLED IN
FLANDERS, 1642

— FROM THE IRISH, BY
JAMES CLARENCE
MANGAN



Most cultures have stories of ghosts that haunt their borders. These unexplained sightings entice both seasoned and amateur adventurers alike. Many travel great distances just to get a chance to test their mettle. Yet there is one spirit that garners such dread, which these same adventurers will venture nowhere near. Words cannot capture her preternatural powers, but one word tries: banshee.

And yet, there is such a dichotomy in the accounts that one often wonders whether any of the information is truly reliable or if they are just boogeyman stories told to children to ensure good behavior. These stories give birth to a spirit of legend shrouded in mystery. Some believe her to be a ghost, and others flesh. The truth, however, is even more disturbing – the banshee is all of these things and more.

The first banshee

For Eluiwaue, it was a love unrequited. She ventured outside her station and outside her race, but she loved him so. For Elian it was a simple fling spurred on by his academy mates at the local tavern. The tryst led to a scandal for Clan McDonagal and a lifetime of pain and anguish for Eluiwaue. In order to appease his father and clear the once-good name of McDonagal, Elian ended it with Eluiwaue.

Eluiwaue was buried alive somewhere in the Nighttella Forrest. As she struggled for her last

breath, Eluiwaue cursed the name of Elian and swore that if she ever freed herself from her dirt prison, she would haunt him and any man who every scorned a woman so. As her last breath expired her prayer was answered. Unfortunately, since vengeance filled her soul, *her* god was unable to hear her cry, but something else did; something terrible. The demon reached down through the dirt, took hold of Eluiwaue's lifeless form with her talons and breathed new life into her body. Unfortunately, for Eluiwaue it was the breath of unlife. Eluiwaue blinked her eyes several times to clear away the earth caked on their surface. Her eyes were having difficulty adjusting to light. Images blurred. But no matter how many times she blinked she could not shake away the grotesque image standing before her. Hovering just above her, with large black wings fully extended, was her savior: a three-headed abomination known as Konare. One head was that of a beautiful woman, with jet black hair wrapping around her body, covering her naked form. A second head was that of an old crone, with thinning, silver hair that matched the length of the first head's hair, equally covering the other half of the demon's

body. The third head rested between the other two and was a twisted version of the other two heads. The face contained elements of both the young and old heads, giving it an appearance of being split down the middle.

Konare asked Eluiwaue what her heart desired most. Eluiwaue responded, "To destroy any who betrayed those they loved." With a depraved grin the demon agreed. Moreover, that same power would be passed on to any woman who befell the same fate as Eluiwaue.

Becoming a banshee

Banshees are restless female spirits who, at the time of death, have had some great injustice befall them. Ever since that dark pact was made, Konare made it her mission to transform every vengeful woman into a banshee. Some banshees, like the progenitor, Eluiwaue, are formed when women are betrayed by loved ones. Another common cause for the creation

of banshees is when a mother and child die simultaneously during childbirth. Whatever the reason, all stories have the same genesis; the banshee is unable to move on to its otherworldly destination and is forever cursed to wail in anguish.

This heart-wrenching torment is the fuel for the banshee's hatred. This hatred consumes her and, unfortunately, the banshee usually channels this hatred to unsuspecting victims. The target of the banshee's fury should be the banshee's killer. However, due to the condition of the banshee's mind at the time of the becoming, she often has difficulty grasping reality (see **psychology**), which frequently leads the banshee to channel her hatred to many a poor, innocent traveler.

Physiology

There is a great deal of scholarly debate concerning the physical appearance of the banshee. Reports vary from the very young and beautiful to the old and decrepit, from the corporeal to the incorporeal, and from the living to the dead.

Concerning the banshee's physical form, the truth is that she manifests both corporeality and incorporeality. The difference lies in the location of her body. Banshees can assume a physical form when within a 120-foot radius of their original burial site. However, to stray a further distance the banshee must assume her incorporeal form. This is not to say that she cannot manifest an incorporeal form within the 120-foot circle; she certainly can and do so at will. As an incorporeal being she assumes all protection of similar ethereal creatures.

There is one known exception to this rule. It is true that banshees are tethered to their gravesite, assuming their final remains are on land. It does not account for women whose bodies have been disposed of in a body of water. River banshees can assume corporeal form as long as they are 120 feet from anywhere a river flows, as long as their final remains are located somewhere in the river (note: this is the same for any water source). This gives the river banshee vast range. This may very well explain some of the inconsistencies in banshee reports, especially when it comes to corporeal and incorporeal forms. In addition, banshees can *river step*, which allows them to meld into the river and move at lightning speeds within the water (see **new banshee abilities**)

At first it was mistakenly assumed that all banshees were undead elves or related to the fey. This was probably due to the origin of the first banshee and stories associated forthwith, but banshees can be from any race and are not reserved for one particular race. That being said, banshees are *all* female. There are no male banshees.

Reports also conflict over the age of the banshee. Banshees have been reported to be of varying ages, ranging from young adult to

the venerable. The truth is that banshees can manifest any physical form or age they desire. Typically, they range from beautiful women in their mid-20s to elderly hags reminiscent of the witches of yore. One report did, however, mention a child banshee seen near the Natrugan Stream.

The beautiful maiden visage is used for two purposes. The first is often to deliver a message, such as an omen of death; the second is much more sinister. This visage is used to beguile the unwary. Here the banshee lures unsuspecting males deeper into the forest where more evil abominations may abide. Occasionally, banshees have worked in collaboration with other banshees or hags to utterly destroy more seasoned adventurers.

Common sense would dictate that, in their physical forms, banshees would be clothed in the same outfits that they donned as a woman at the time of her death. And while this tends to be accurate, there have been so many sightings of banshees in colors of green, brown, and white, it seems prudent to mention. These clothes have ranged from tattered rags to grave linens to long cloaks.

Whatever the apparent age of the banshee, all share some physical commonalities. All representations have long, unkempt hair. Hair color tends to be on the lighter side, ranging from blonde to shades of red, with banshees of elderly appearance having long hair in shades of gray or white. Their eyes are streaked red from constant wailing, and when the banshee is in the process of the keen, will often cry streams of blood. This sight is so unsettling that anyone witnessing it requires a saving throw vs. magic, or will be paralyzed with fear and unable to move for one to four melee rounds.

The banshee's wail

Since the time of Eluiwaue's tragic end, the banshee's wail became her curse and her greatest power. The wail, or keen, is the outward expression of the injustice that the banshee suffered prior to her death. This wild cry is her eternal damnation, for every night the banshee is constantly reminded of her injustice. This lament often sounds like the crying and moaning of a woman, but has also been described as a high-pitched shrill reminiscent of a bird of prey. In truth, very few who hear the banshee wail ever live to tell the tale.

Death wail: Although the death wail is probably the most well-known expression of the keening, its exact sound is difficult to describe for two reasons. First of all, there is no sound like it in nature, and secondly, those who hear it and fail to save vs. magic succumb to instant death. Although the intonations of this wail are indefinable, they fall somewhere between a high-pitched screech of an attack bird and an æolian harp.

What happens to the victim of the death

wail? Outwardly, the victim's body becomes frigid, the face gaunt, and the jaw drops open, as if the individual is attempting to emulate the very sound they are hearing. No word or sound utters forth from the victim's throat. The victim's eyes glaze over just before the blood vessels explode, and then moments later the body collapses. Internally, the wail causes such fear that the victim's fight-or-flight response kicks into high gear, but at such a rapid pace that the shock to the system is overwhelming. The brain injects an overload of adrenaline and noradrenaline into the bloodstream, which constricts blood vessels, dilates the pupils to the point of the eyes rupturing, and increases the heart rate exponentially. The hormones cause the vessels in the heart to swell, inducing rapid clots and backup, causing the heart to fail. The victim dies of fright.

Variant wail abilities (optional)

The banshee has the ability to modify the pitch, tone, and volume of her wail to alter its effects.

Shatter scream: The banshee can use her wail to shatter objects. This wail can be used once a day and causes sonic damage to an object of the banshee's choice. Items are permitted saving throws vs. disintegration (use saving throws for item listed in the *DMG* p.80). The *shatter scream* ability can also be used to shatter ear drums, causing permanent deafness in player (save vs. breath weapon negates).

Shudder scream: The banshee can cause the earth to tremble. This wail can be used as a variant to the death wail and can be used once per day. It also works as the *earthquake* spell.

Sweet song: The banshee can utter a *sweet song* to warn of impending death. The *sweet song* is quite melodic and peaceful. It never changes volume, no matter how far away the banshee is from the chosen recipient. To most listeners the *song* does not have any discernible words in any recognizable language. Her voice resembles a melodious harp played by a master hand. A *comprehend languages* spell may reveal the meaning of the keen at the DM's discretion. Examples of some meanings may include one of the following: victim, time, or place of death.

New banshee abilities (optional)

Konare's Guide: Some banshees can shape-shift. The preferred form is the crow. When in crow form banshees can travel outside the radius of the gravesite but cannot physically interact with any creatures.

River step: The river banshee has the ability to meld with water. Once the banshee performs this action she is, for all intents and

purposes, invisible. Once melded, the banshee can move with the current and either use her own speed or that of the river to move. The banshee can reappear in either corporeal or incorporeal form.

Wet kiss: River banshees can spew water from their mouth when in melee range. If the banshee hits, the PC must save vs. breath weapon or begin to drown. If the character fails the save, his lungs fill with water and his hit points will immediately drop to zero. Holding one's breath or coughing out the water is useless, since the lungs are supernaturally filled with water. Beginning on the following round, the PC must make a successful constitution check, as though he had been holding his breath underwater and run out of air. He can stay alive as long as he makes a successful constitution check once per round; each check after the first is made with a cumulative +2 modifier to the die roll. (See the section on swimming in the *Wilderness Survival Guide*). If he does not regain consciousness, the character drops to -1 hp and is in a state of near death. If the victim is not revived, or at least rolled over on his back before failing a constitution check, he will die of suffocation.

Psychology of the banshee

It is the dream of man that on that final day, as his life is played out before his eyes, that he might petition

his god to revisit one event so as to change the course of his life, hoping to right just one wrong. Be careful mortal what ye wish for! For the banshee dreamed the same dream and now forever lives that day!

—Vesra the Seer

The first moments of unlife are usually quite disorienting, as the banshee struggles to comprehend her surroundings. However, after the initial shock, all that the banshee feels from that point on is hatred – hatred that is usually followed by vengeance. From here on out, all the banshee can focus on are the events that caused her death. She is caught in an endless loop, forever cursed to play the day of her death over and over again. The only exception is that, for her, the death always ends at night, no matter what time she actually died in her lifetime. Upon reliving this grisly scene the banshee wails in anguish.

The motivation behind their vengeance varies, although acts of betrayal seem to be a common theme. Just like that of Eluiwae, many banshees have been victims of a lover's betrayal. This, though, is not the only act that may cause a banshee to rise. In the case of the young girl banshee, a child's death at the hands of her father could certainly cause her spirit to seek vengeance. Other reasons might include a victim who was killed, a young teen who was bullied, or someone who committed suicide but blamed others for her chosen

course. The common denominator in all cases, though, is that banshees are risen spirits who are victims of an extreme injustice.

In the morbid scene that the banshee is forced to replay, whomever she encounters plays an integral part in the illusion. Unfortunately, for our PCs, that role is usually the perpetrator. And since the banshee is motivated by hatred towards this individual, her attacks are ruthless. She will not stop until that individual (who she believes is her killer) is dead, and anyone who attempts to prevent this from happening incurs her wrath.

There are, however, a small portion of banshees for which vengeance is not their first priority. These banshees are not evil. The reason lies in their initial moments of unlife. When the soul is prevented from continuing on its course to the afterworld, not all people are able to hold onto their sanity as they cross over to undeath. More often than not, as the soul is ripped into undeath, the person has a difficult time comprehending the fabric of reality. As her mind begins to unravel she often loses the memory of the events that led her to the grave. The more her mind deteriorates, the more evil the banshee becomes. The better her grip on reality, the more likely the banshee will remain neutral or good aligned.

Some banshees wail to warn of imminent death. These banshees are known as **death messengers**. Unlike the more aggressive variants, these banshees retain some of their memories from before their death and are more than likely not victims of betrayal. Death messengers can be of any alignment but tend toward the neutral spectrum.

Death messengers use their keening to serve as an omen. Legend states that those who hear the keen will have someone close to them die. These banshees are considered to be intercessors between this world and the next, and their voice is the guide. Neither scholars nor witch hunters have been able to ascertain with any accuracy how long loved ones have left to live after the keen is heard. The time seems to vary from case to case. Some have been weeks, some days and, unfortunately, sometimes the loved one is standing nearby with just seconds remaining.

Typically banshees are solitary creatures. There are exceptions. There have been reports of banshees who have gathered together in pairs and broods (three or four). Additionally, some banshees have worked with hags to lure PCs to their doom. Graveyard banshees are known to lead groups of undead, which often include ghouls and lesser ghosts.

There have been occasions where several banshees have joined forces and performed a mass keening. There are two reasons banshees will perform mass keenings – to portend the death of a very important figure such as a king, or to warn of an event that could cause mass deaths, such as a war or a plague. ■



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Bridging generations

by Luke Gygax

I was sitting in my office at work near the end of the day last week when my phone chimed, alerting me that I had an incoming text message. I checked my screen and read the message from my sister, Elise. She let me know that an old TSR employee and artist, Darlene Pekul, (now legally known as Darlene the Artist) was auctioning some old gaming stuff on eBay, including a portrait of Elise. I decided to surf over and check out what was available. I remembered Darlene as the artist who painted the sign for Dragonlands Arabians, my parents' stable, in the early 1980s. I found a couple of pencil sketches of Harold Johnson and Mike Carr, both of whom come and help me at Gary Con every year. So, I placed a bid, thinking it would be fun to reunite them with a sketch of themselves from 30 years ago at Gary Con V (someone else ended up outbidding me, unfor-

tunately – sorry, Harold and Mike).

As I scrolled through the items for auction, I saw an image that immediately evoked the fondest of childhood memories. There on the small screen sat a Vincent Price-looking magician in a chair, holding a wand with a miniature griffin hovering over his arm – *The Dragon* issue #8! I didn't recall many specifics from this issue, but thought that it contained a really cool short story from Gardner Fox about a magic-using family in modern times called the Finzer Family. I knew that I wanted a copy of this issue, not as part of a collection though, as I am not much of a collector. I wanted to read this story to my little girls, like my dad read it to me when I was little. Miriam, who is five, loves fantasy and science fiction (of course!) and Amira, two years old, well, she would appreciate it eventually. Strong and joyful emotions

welled up as I imagined myself reading this story.

I knew I needed to win this magazine!

With all this whirling around in my mind I placed my bid of about \$20 without any trepidation. This was certainly a fair price to share this experience with my little princesses. About 45 minutes remained until the end of the auction and I expected to win the item handily. One of my non-commissioned officers [*Luke is a major in the Army National Guard –ED.*] came in about that time and I spent the next 35 minutes working on his issue before I began powering down and getting ready to head for home. I needed to check eBay and see where I stood, as only ten minutes remained and I had a ten-minute drive home. Thus, I had to complete my mission to requisition this item via smartphone. As those of you familiar with

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eBay have already guessed, I had been outbid. No problem thought I, I'll just up my bid to \$30. I won the bid, only to be outbid in the next minute. So it went, back and forth, for the next few minutes until I was staring at a bid of \$62 with five minutes on the clock and the seconds ticking away. I didn't want to foolishly overpay for it here when I could pick it up elsewhere for less. I would have to square accounts with the CEO of Gygas Family, West Coast Division, when I got home. I needed some advice, and quickly.

Fortunately, I know someone that was involved with *Dragon* back in its nascence. I typed in "Tim Kask" and pressed call. Thankfully, Tim wasn't screening his calls and he picked up on the second ring. After the exchange of greetings, I got down to business. "Hey Tim, how much is *Dragon* #8 worth?" Tim paused before replying since he probably doesn't have much need to keep this information at his mental fingertips. Upon reflection, this is probably not a question he fields regularly and I figured he was wondering why the heck I was asking him about it at 8:30 on a Monday night. I knew I had about three minutes to get the information I needed, say my thanks and goodbye and log back in to eBay to outbid that slimy so-and-so that was competing with me. So I cut to the chase and told him that one was going for 65 bucks or so on eBay and was that worth it? Tim thought that seemed a bit high and said I could probably ask Frank (Mentzer) if he had an extra *Dragon* #8 if I needed to round out my collection. I explained that my primary motivation was getting a hold of "The Finzer Family" story since it reminded me of story time with my Dad and I wanted to share that with his granddaughters. I was still thinking about bidding on this anyway, just to ensure that I had it on hand when Tim offered me a solution that, much as Bard's Black Arrow dropped Smaug into a watery grave saving the men of Laketown, ended my need to engage in an eBay bidding war. He would make sure that I got a copy.

True to his word, the next day our mutual friend and *Gygax* magazine co-worker, Jim Wampler, fixed me up with a copy of *The Dragon* #8. Once again my eyes beheld Bill Hannon's cover art. I quickly scrolled to "The Finzer Family – A Tale of Modern Magic" by Harry O. Fischer. (Okay, so my memory isn't perfect. I was lucky enough to have met Harry Fischer and Fritz Lieber at Gen Con X, but that was 30 plus years ago, so I got them mixed up. Both great authors and I really dig Gardner Fox's *Kothar the Barbarian* novels.) As I was saying, thanks to good friends, I was able to rediscover this lost treasure and share this fantastic adventure with my girls over the Thanksgiving holiday weekend, much as my father did with me decades ago. I look forward to continuing our journeys together as we explore the many planets, planes, dimensions and realities waiting to be (re)discovered. ■

Gaming with a virtual tabletop

by Nevin P. Jones

"I really want to play a game with you guys again." That's how it all began. Separated by distance, my friends and I lamented that we couldn't gather around a table and enjoy each other's company. So we built a system called Roll20 to solve that problem. Since its launch, we've had countless players thanking us for reuniting their groups, but we've also been lucky enough to expose a whole new generation of players to the joy of tabletop gaming. When I first got into tabletop gaming, I often talked with my younger brother about considering getting into the hobby – but he was uncertain. Recently, because of Roll20.net, he's been able to start...

We live in a world with a plethora of easily accessible entertainment choices right at our finger tips. Movies, books, TV shows, and video games all vie for our attention at every opportunity. And with such an incessant sensory assault of products that are simple to use, it is easy to let the more intimidating, complicated ones slip through the cracks. As an avid video gamer, I have always viewed tabletop gaming as an untouchable, time-consuming source of entertainment with too many complicated elements; but that was all before I was introduced to Roll20. Simple, flexible, and welcoming, Roll20 was just the thing I needed

to finally try tabletop gaming – and I love it.

From as early as I can remember I had a controller in my hand. My childhood was spent trying to balance my parental units' insistence on completing my homework and playing outside, before I helped Mario in the Mushroom Kingdom. In high school I played football, while trying to finish the fight with Master Chief or find weapons of legendary status with my hero in Albion. Even now as a college student, video games allow me to entertain myself without complicated planning. Before, I could never understand why people played tabletop RPGs. Why spend so much time for such little payoff that could easily be done with a video game? I never knew until I started using Roll20.

The beauty of the Roll20 system comes from how elegantly it simplifies tabletop gaming. Stats and story elements can be tracked through an online journal, and maps and tokens come preloaded on the system. Dice rolls are played out with formula commands in the text box, but even that gesture has been resolved with my favorite feature, macros, which are shortcuts to oft-repeated commands.

(continued on page 56)



Pictured L - R: Nolan T. Jones, Richard Zayas, Riley Dutton, and Robby Kocour

Keeping magic magical

by Dennis Sustare

Even though you are the game master (GM) for an old-school, fantasy role-playing game, you never want magic to be routine and boring. Attacked by kobolds? Our magic-user casts *sleep*. Attacked by skeletons? Our cleric turns them. Unless the party is planning to conquer a specific obstacle, the magic-user may always carry the same favorite spells. Admittedly, a clever player may devise creative uses for one spell that weren't necessarily considered when the rules were written. An excellent example is the many uses I have seen for the *web* spell, beyond merely entangling a target. And sometimes a player will find a loophole in the spell description and use it mercilessly. For example, if your *create water* spell produces a pint at first level, and doubles at each successive level, it doesn't sound too terrible – at least until your 20th level creates 547 tons of water to use as an offensive weapon, drowning everyone in a passageway or crushing everyone in a stairwell (ah, so that's why they call it a "well"). Incidentally, the old *create food* and *water* spells were changed to specify how many people they served, and became additive rather than multiplicative with levels.

As GM, one way you could deal with this is by weakening magic through house rules or adventure design, so that its use never becomes routine. For example:

- Can only carry one instance of a spell; no multiple *sleep* spells
- Have your kobolds attack in three waves, so the *sleep* spell only gets the first batch
- Give your skeletons "anti-turn" amulets
- Make spell-casting unreliable, or make backfires more common and severe
- Make overly powerful, low-level spells into high level ones instead

But remember, the game should be fun for your magic-user players as well. So perhaps a better approach might be to use more creative magic rules, and depart from "in-the-rule-book" magic. Let's look at some possible ways to liven up magic use in your game.

Find some magic from a different game system and incorporate it into yours. This can be particularly effective if most of your players have never tried that system before. For example, your magic user could be an herbalist, and you

could use the herbal magic rules from *Bunnies & Burrows*. This requires collection of possibly unknown plant materials, choosing parts from a particular location (such as root, stem, berry, etc), and using your sense of smell to identify them by type and clarity. You then perform one of nine different preparations (chew, crumble, wet, dry, etc). Faulty preparation may end in ruin or produce poison-weed, but proper preparation may yield magical herbs. These can then be used by the herbalist to protect from parasites, cure disease, cause or heal wounds, or induce hallucinations, among other effects. Even though these rules were originally intended for use by herbalist rabbits, there is no reason why you cannot have one of your player characters use them, by creating some modifications to fit the context of human characteristics and diseases.

Or, maybe you could use the excellent psionic-based sorcery rules from Jeff Dee's *Quick-silver*. Psychic ability (PSYC) is a fundamental attribute of your character that is set at initial creation, and it determines how much psychic energy (NRG) you can devote to magic. As you gain experience, you may gain new sorcerous disciplines or enhance existing ones. Each skill level in a discipline adds new and more powerful spells. For example, in the Conflagration discipline, your lowest level spell is *spark*, which is somewhat equivalent to lighting a match. But at a high level you can achieve *firestorm*, and by instilling the spell with more NRG you can widen the area of effect or increase the amount of damage inflicted. Other disciplines include Empathy, Magesight, Mental Attack, Mind Over Body, Mindspeech, Psy Transfer, Prescience, Sleep, and Telekinesis. Remember that each discipline has multiple levels of distinct spells. These have a very different feel from traditional old-school *D&D* magic, and I recommend you check out the system.

Another possibility is to adapt selected spells from collectible card games, such as *Magic: The Gathering*. You could devise a way for players to acquire cards, and hold onto them until it is time to use the spell. Then the character casts the spell and the player returns the card to the GM. In this way, each spell can be used just once (unless you can acquire the card again), but with many cards in your hand, you might have many spells to choose from. Just be careful you don't inadvertently make magic too

powerful for your campaign.

Even with the regular spells, you could add additional casting requirements, such as having the players draw a glyph, make a gesture, or do whatever you might find amusing and they find challenging. If your wizard players were all fond of the Harry Potter books, why not have them cast their spells by declaring them in Latin? Don't go overboard, of course. You are not advised to make them literally juggle four balls to cast a 4th level spell, six balls for a 6th level, and so forth, unless of course your players are all in *Cirque du Soleil*.

As an alternative to borrowing magic from another game system, you might bring in magic from a favorite book, film, or video game, though this might take much more design effort on your part. For example, the magic in the *Mistborn* series, by Brandon Sanderson, is wonderful and quite different from the familiar *D&D* magic. In his Allomantic magic, metals are grouped into categories and associated with specific magics. For example, the Physical group includes iron, steel, tin, and pewter. Customarily, an Allomantic magic-user has access to only one of these; a Lurcher, for example, can burn iron and thereby pull metals towards himself. You may wonder how to use this skill in a game, but imagine how you might disarm a person with a metal weapon, or manipulate a metal object, or even fly (by pulling on a metal object that is more massive than yourself, thus pulling yourself towards it). Burning steel allows you to push metal (thus, the opposite of iron). Burning pewter (done by Thugs) gives you great strength and endurance, but, when the pewter runs out, the pain and injury you resisted can hit you all at once. Read the excellent books of the *Mistborn* series to see just how all the metals work, and the creative ways they can be used. In addition, Crafty Games recently published a *Mistborn RPG*, so you can give the magic system a look.

If your players are very good at roleplay and thinking on their feet, you might also utilize something like the spirit communication magic used by Rachel Aaron's *Eli Monpress*. Her first book starts with Eli having a conversation with the door of his dungeon cell. Surely the door doesn't want to stay stuck because of those unpleasant nails! After all, they are

only held in place by the pressure of the wood itself. Finally the door agrees, it expels the nails, and its wooden boards go clattering to the floor, whereupon Eli walks out of his imprisonment. You can imagine all the ways a smooth-tongued thief might use such an ability to his advantage. Be prepared to intervene if the spirit magic of your clever gamers becomes so potent that the party has no obstacles to overcome.

There is an old tradition of magical secrecy, where mages never tell others how magic works in an attempt to maintain their own powers. You could use this with bright and adventurous players by not letting them know about your magic rules, and prevent their characters from learning magic through study, apprenticeship, or reference books and scrolls. Rather, upon searching a room in a dungeon, give a player a scrap of paper that tells something about an unknown spell, but none of the details of its effect. If they want to try it, have them use it during actual game play by describing their intent and declaring they cast the spell. Then you, as GM, decide what happens. For example, the player has found a *view of the sun* spell, but they don't have the slightest clue what it might do. When cast upon a person or object, it might make the target start glowing, or give off warmth. It might create the illusion of a small sun, thus hiding the true appearance of the target. It might act like a flare, or a fireball, or indeed a 50-megaton thermonuclear device. It might be like a traditional continual light spell, or might have some other strange effect altogether. You can see how it would take a brave magic user to go around casting unknown spells to see what happens. And there is no reason why you couldn't have one spell that has two or more effects at different times, such as one effect above ground and another below, or one in daytime and another at night, or one when cast on an inanimate object and another on a living creature. Use your imagination and liven up your game.

Finally, if you are an exceptionally brave GM, you could

let your players invent unique spells, with their success dependent on how advanced their character is as a wizard. You see this often in literature, but doing it in a game is tricky. For example, the party could come upon a bridge that has been broken down, wherein the wizard says he is going to try to reassemble the bridge with magic. You, as GM, decide if this is possible, and whether that wizard can try it; then you decide the results. Is the bridge now as good as new? Is it wobbly due to missing components and likely to fall into the torrent as soon as someone crosses it? Is it the illusion of an intact bridge with no substance, or does the spell just fail outright? If you and your players are really sharp, this type of magic could be lots of fun, but it runs the risk of superhero exaggeration: "I create a spell to reverse time and bring our entire army back to life, then another spell to open up the earth to swallow the

enemy army."

Whatever approach you use, making magic use more interesting, and more magical, will enhance your game for your players as well as yourself. And if you design a magic that is compelling and new, perhaps some publisher will say, "That looks great. Let me print and sell that for you!" ■



Playing it the science fiction way

by James M. Ward

I've been around the hobby scene for a number of years. One of my claims to fame is the creation of the first science-fiction role-playing game, *Metamorphosis Alpha*. The game is still in print and several different versions are for sale on drivethrurpg.com. The reason I bring this up is that I've introduced literally thousands of people to science-fiction roleplaying.

One of the ways I saw it done was at a fantasy gaming night at Gary Gygax's house. I was part of a group that played every month in the Greyhawk fantasy campaign. We all had favorite *AD&D* characters of varying levels. Every gaming night we would decide if we played our high-level characters (characters in the 12th level range) or our mid-level characters around the 8th level.

On one particular night we were playing our mid-level ones. I was using my half-elf thief/magic-user. I was quite proud of his collection of useful magic items. For some reason, Gary insisted we take our spell books with us if we were spell casters. I didn't think much of it at the time, but I made sure the volumes were protected in an interdimensional box I owned. The box could fit all of my magical scrolls and spell books. I put that container in a steel box that wasn't too much to add to my backpack. The box was resistant to all sorts of damage, from blows to fire balls.

Another odd feature of that game was the addition of a non-player character (NPC) to the group. Gary rarely did this, but the NPC was a powerful dwarf warrior. We were happy to have him along, since all he wanted was a share of any gold we got. Not having to give the dwarf a share of magic items was cool with the party.

We started the adventure by going down to the great doors of a castle. Gary's dungeons were a marvel to behold. The great doors were specially locked and led to dangerous levels

filled with dragons, giants, and more. About a half hour into the adventure we came across an all-steel corridor that none of us had ever encountered before. We started to explore the passage and traveled a hundred or so yards down the corridor. Suddenly, Gary got up and said, "Jim come over here."

I didn't think anything of it as he would often share secret information with this or that player so the others couldn't hear. It was then he let me in on the big surprise.

Gary told me, "Jim, all of those characters have been transported to the starship Warden." He saw the look in my eye and I became instantly worried for one of my favorite characters. "You can't go back the way you came," he said, "The group will have to find some other way to escape the ship."

So, I went and got my starship files from my car and sat at the end of the table where Gary always sat to referee the game. He had this look of glee on his face as he took up the character of his favorite dwarf. That night the group began exploring the colonization starship, Warden. They were fantasy characters in a science-fiction world. Quickly, I decided that all of their fantasy materials would work excellently versus the Warden's mutants. Fire balls would deliver maximum damage and sleep spells would put to sleep even large creatures. On the other side of the coin, mutant powers would always be successful against the fantasy characters, so they would receive no saving throws that would apply to normal characters belonging on the Warden.

All the players were shocked at what Gary did to us. Every once in awhile, for years afterward, we would get the group together and play the fantasy characters on the Warden. I constantly hoped for conditions where I could logically send my character home.

It's 30 years later and Gary has passed, and it looks like I'll never get my half-elf home. Player characters still meet up with the half-elf if they go to the proper level and deal with the proper tribe. He's a cranky dude, that elf, and characters rarely get a good deal from him. He keeps his fireball wand fully charged and doing 36 points of fire damage often does the job as he dreams of home.

A year before Gary passed, he asked me to run a *Metamorphosis Alpha* game for his group. I had them all roll up Templar Knights. They were heavy-duty fighters with clerical abilities. On the first night of gaming the group boarded a ship and sailed to the island of Malta. In historical times, Malta was a Templar stronghold of great power. A terrible lightning storm came up, and when the sun rose the next morning, they found themselves lost at the mouth of a massive river.

For the next four months, Gary's group explored foreign land and interpreted the mutants and science as terrible godless demonic beings sent to test their faith. Running the game was great fun for me as the game master, to watch them play those knight characters as they learned how to fire laser rifles (calling them crossbows of light) and throw plasma grenades. Some things they wouldn't touch. Why ride in a metal floating wagon when they had perfectly good war horses? Using a combination of mutant energy and computations of the artificial intelligences on the ship, Gary succeeded in getting his entire group transported back to Earth. I feel sorry for those Saracens when they encountered mini-missiles and black ray guns from very unusual Templars.

The point of this set of tales is the fact that diehard, fantasy role-players can get a great deal of fun playing a science-fiction version of their game. Give them a chance and see what happens. ■



DMing for your toddler

by Cory Doctorow



My daughter Poesy is only four years old, and she can't read or do complex sums yet, so when I decided to start playing *D&D* with her, I knew I'd need to come up with a super-streamlined set of rules that could hold her attention and enable the kind of imaginative play she excels at already.

Poesy loves to roleplay. Give her a couple of stuffed toys or figurines of any description and she'll invent complex scenarios for them, roping in any handy and willing grownups to play opposite her characters, sometimes demanding that we come up with our own scenarios to play out. I'd intuited that this wasn't so different from the *D&D* games I grew up playing – though I'd been numerate and literate for some years before I started.

I happened upon a set of factory-painted plastic *D&D* minis while looking for a toy to bring home in the dealer's room at a regional science fiction convention in Chicago. After marveling at the astounding advances in robotic toy-painting, I had a brain-flash. A minute later, I'd bought a handsome dice-bag

and filled it with a dozen assorted figs and a set of polyhedral dice.

After I got home to London, I performed the ancient ritual of unpacking the souvenirs I'd brought home for the kid. As I'd hoped, she was captivated by the intricate painting on the figs and the jewel-like facets of the dice, and demanded that we play *right now*.

Poesy has a piggy bank full of the small change she's picked up or appropriated from us over the years, and I dumped it out and sorted out the different denominations. Once that was done, I used our Ikea playmat (which has a street-scape laid out on it), some cushions, a shoebox, and a cardboard doll-castle to set up a town, a cave, and a castle.

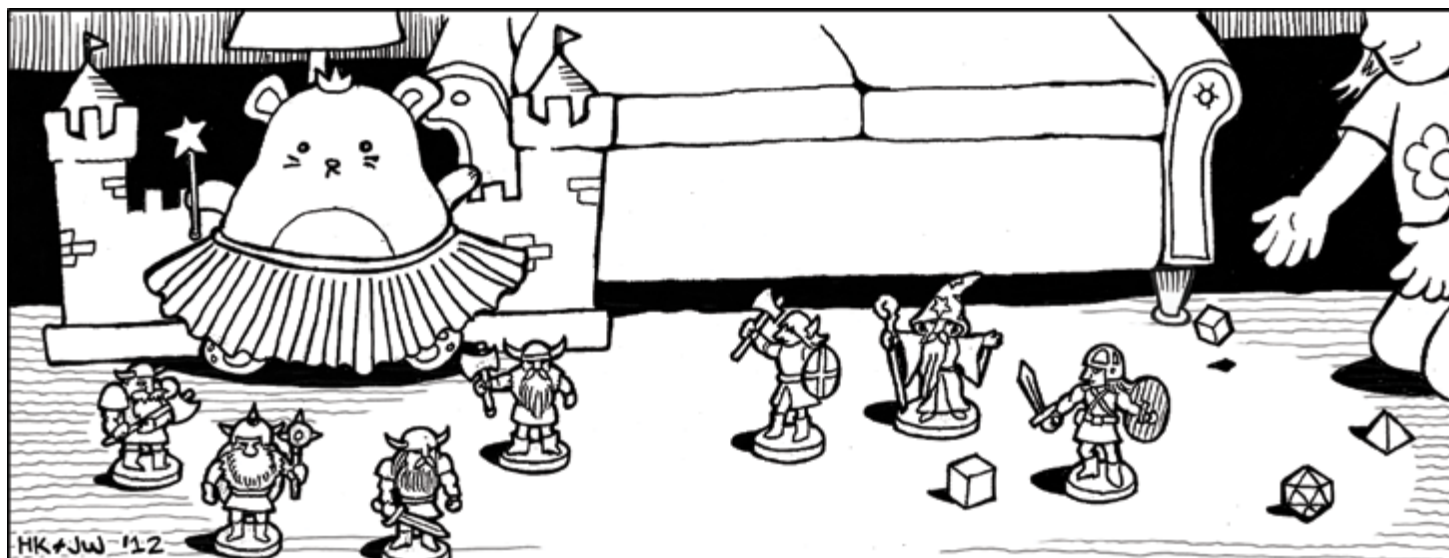
I put all the "bad-guy" minis on strategic spots on the castle, and stuck one of Poesy's stuffed toys – a winged hamster she calls "Fairy Hamster" – in the middle of its courtyard. I gave her two minis to play, and set them down on the playmat's ice-cream parlor, declaring this to be the "tavern." I put two more bad-ass-looking figs next to them, and

declared them to be my NPCs.

I improvised a very quick background. My NPCs are in the tavern, planning to rescue their friend the Fairy Hamster, who is being held hostage in Castle Doom. Did Poesy's characters want to help? They sure did!

I rolled up the mat while talking about the party's long walk in the woods, then set out the party's figs in the vicinity of the "cave," (the shoebox) on the "hill" (the cushion). My NPCs made some suggestions for besieging the castle. I had an archer and a magic-user (M-U), and Poesy had a fighter and a magic-user of her own. We brainstormed out a mix of ranged attacks and melee, and went to town.

I gave the party the initiative for the first turn. Poesy rolled dice for movement for each of her characters. The elf magic-user got a d6, the armored fighter got a d4, the totals corresponding to the distance in inches on our living-room floor (we used a tape-measure). Poesy didn't get immediately that this meant that on average the M-U was going to be faster than the fighter, but she caught on very quickly.



Once the party got in range of the castle's defenders, we started combat. Each party-member paired with a defender and launched an attack. The M-U's got to choose between *magic missile* and *fireball*. I explained that *magic missile* was harder to hit with, but did more damage than *fireball*. We used a D20, and I required Poesy to roll higher than the number of inches between her fig and the defender she was aiming for for *fireball*. For *magic missile*, we used the same system, but subtracted two from her roll (this being the most complex subtraction she can do in her head).

The first time any of the characters got hit, we generated their hit-points (in other words, we rolled the characters' stats as they were required, rather than rolling them in advance). I wanted Poesy to be able to keep track of the hit-points herself, which let out pen and paper scorekeeping. Instead, we rolled a d8 for each character's hit-points, and took that many coins out of her piggy-bank and stacked them up next to each mini. When characters sustained damage (a d4 for fireball, a d6 for

magic missile or arrow, a d8 for a sword), Poesy took that many coins out of each character's pile. By varying the type of coin we used for each character – one got pennies, another was marked with 2p pieces, or 5p or 10p, etc) – we made it easy to sort out whose HPs were who's when they were (inevitably) knocked over. I decreed that all the magic users could cast healing spells instead of attacks, each doing 1d4's worth of restoration.

So, this turned out to be a *lot* of fun. The longer we played, the more we improvised. At one point, I grabbed a glass sphere sculpture from a shelf and told Poesy it was a "crystal ball" that the M-U could use to direct the archer's arrows, skipping an attack to give the archer an automatic hit. Poesy loved this, and really got into the roleplaying, "coming to the rescue" of other characters by healing them or helping them with aimhacks. By the time we'd liberated the Fairy Hamster, she was hooked.

We continue to play, about once a month, always with a different campaign improvised from whatever is lying around at the time.

By getting straight into the story and going quickly to the combat (or trap-springing, puzzle-solving, or what-have-you), and by saving the character-rolling until it's needed, I'm able to tailor the experience to the attention-span of a four-year-old. Our games last about 45 minutes, and they're very kinetic, with a lot of jumping around, crawling on the floor, and so on.

She's recently leveled up in the drawing and coloring department, so my next project will be to get her started on miniatures painting. I imagine that our games will be that much more fun once she's playing characters she "made" herself.

In the meantime, we've got another activity in our daddy-daughter repertoire, a nice break from playing "school" and the other "realistic" imaginative games we usually play. There's certainly also some sneaky basic math skills acquisition going on too, but that's beside the point: we play for fun, and Poesy would spot it a mile away if I switched to a game that was "good for her." ■

How to DM for your toddler — the rules of Cory's game

You will need:

A set of polyhedral dice
A decent-sized pile of coins, of various denomination
Absolutely any props, figures, or toys you like. Setting up your scene is half the fun.

Initiative:

Let your child go first.
It's always good to see a child show some initiative.

Turns:

Each character can move, attack, or cast a spell during their turn.

Movement:

If any character chooses to move during their turn, roll the appropriate die (1d4 for a fighter, archer, or monster; 1d6 for a magic-user) at the beginning of the turn. The number rolled is how far that character can move, in inches, during that turn.

Hit points (HP):

HP are determined the first time a character or monster is hit. Roll 1d8 to determine HP, and place a stack of coins corresponding to the die roll next to that mini. Use different denominations to help track which hit points belong to which character or monster. As each character's hit points are lost, keep the coins representing lost hit points next to the mini, in case a *heal* spell is cast on the character later.

To hit:

Fighters must be within 1" to attack, and hit automatically.
Archers and magic-users roll 1d20 to hit. The roll needed to hit is equal to the distance in inches. (The magic-user spell *magic missile* has a -2 penalty to hit.)

Weapons:

Arrow: 1d6 damage; range 20" max
Sword: 1d8 damage, range 1"

Monsters:

Use your imagination, and let the baddies be any type of monster or human(oid) you have toys or miniatures to represent. You can choose to give them similar abilities to your PCs and NPCs, or perhaps your child will invent a few you hadn't considered. Monsters cannot be healed.

CHARACTERS:

Fighter

MOVE: 1d4" per turn
HIT DICE: 1d8
ATTACK: Sword

Archer

MOVE: 1d4" per turn
HIT DICE: 1d8
ATTACK: Arrow

Magic-User

MOVE: 1d6" per turn
HIT DICE: 1d8

SPELL LIST:

Accurate Arrow

Range: 20"
Duration: 1 turn
Casting *accurate arrow* on an archer guarantees the archer's next attack will hit.

Magic Missile

Range: 20"
Damage: 1d6
To-hit: 1d20 -2 vs. distance (natural 20 hits automatically)
This spell is similar to an archer's arrow, and requires a "to hit" roll.

Fireball

Range: 20"
Damage: 1d4
To hit: 1d20 vs. distance (natural 20 hits automatically)

Heal

Range: Unlimited
The magic-user may choose to *heal* any character for 1d4 hit points. Characters may be healed at any time, even if they have reached zero hit points. There is no time limit on healing fallen characters.

Great power for ICONS

by Steve Kenson

The *ICONS Superpowered Roleplaying* game presents a random system for rolling up superhero characters, including their various powers. Players roll on different tables to determine their heroes' powers, with options to substitute themed power choices for some of the random rolls; although, a big part of the fun of hero creation is taking a disparate set of unusual powers and coming up with a theme that ties them all together. Players often find themselves inventing heroes they wouldn't have created if they just sat down to build a hero character "cold."

The forthcoming *Great Power* supplement for *ICONS* expands the range of power options with all new powers and power-generation tables that fit into the existing hero creation rules for the game. The following is a sample of some of the new powers you'll find in its pages. For game masters (GMs) who want to put the material in this article to use right away, use the following optional substitutions on the existing *ICONS* power-generation tables. If a player rolls one of the listed powers, they can choose the associated new power instead.

New Power	Optionally Replaces
Adaptation	Immortality
Corrosion	Life Drain
Dream Control	Astral Projection
Empowerment	Power Theft
Evolution	Alter-Ego
Nemesis	Power Duplication
Servant	Animation
Spatial Control	Elemental Control
Spirit Control	Wizardry

ADAPTATION

Defensive: Adaptation allows you to transform to adapt to hostile environments. After a page of preparation, physical aspects such as appearance, skin, lung capacity, and resistance to natural damage sources change. For example, you can adapt higher Strength to handle an alien planet's gravity, or Life Support to breathe methane. The power adapts to *environments* and not situations; you can't grow wings if you're pushed off a cliff, but you can grow gills and become Aquatic when plunged into water. Similarly, you gain no resistance to attacks, but can gain Heat Resistance amongst the Lava Men. Maximum benefits are at the power's level and last as long as you are

exposed to the environment.

Stunts

Defensive: An Adaptation test against a threat's level allows you to adapt to a danger (such as an attack), rather than just an environment. It still takes a full page to adapt (unless you have the Instant stunt). Such willed adaptations last for the scene, until you adapt to a different danger, or until you are unable to concentrate on them.

Instant: Your body adapts to new conditions as a reaction, without any preparation.

CORROSION

Offensive: You have a corrosive, acidic, burning, or rotting attack that causes power level damage by touch with a successful attack. The target takes half the Corrosion level in damage on each of the following two pages, at the start of the attacker's panel, unless some action is taken to neutralize its effects.

Corrosion damages objects by eating away at their material strength. Subtract the power's level from the object's material strength. Objects reduced to Strength 0 are destroyed. So if level-7 acid strikes steel (material strength 8), it reduces the steel's material strength to 1 (about that of paper) and a second such attack will destroy it.

Stunts

Consumption: Your Corrosion resides in your mouth and digestive tract, allowing you to consume virtually anything, limited only by the size of your mouth. So you can use Corrosion to bite off the ends of guns, chew through rope or cable, and so forth. As a side benefit you are Immune to anything you swallow—mainly toxins, but also things like grenades!

Extended: Your Corrosion damages last for an additional two panels, unless neutralized.

Limits

Blocked (Material-Sensitive): Damage is delivered only to a particular type of material, such as wood or flesh.

Situational (Emotion-Sensitive): Damage is delivered only to creatures harboring a particular emotion, such as fear or greed.

DREAM CONTROL

Mental: You have the ability to manipulate dreams. You can control your own dreams, choosing what you dream. More importantly, you can implant images into the mind of a sleeping individual, like with the Illusion power.

Stunts

Dream Travel: You can enter the short-lived pocket dimension created by a person's



dreams and nightmares. These dream-worlds are outside the boundaries of normal reality and exist solely as a reflection of the dreamer's imagination. You can interact with things in it much as you would in the real world. Use Willpower in place of Strength when operating in the dream world.

Sleep: You can put someone into a deep sleep with a successful Dream Control (Willpower) test.

Limits

Sleeping: You can only use this power when you are asleep. If you are awakened, your dream body returns to your physical body immediately.

EMPOWERMENT

Control: You can give other people powers by touching a subject and taking your action to empower them. You can grant any powers with total levels less than your Empowerment level. The granted powers last as long as you concentrate, or for pages equal to your Empowerment level afterward. You can revoke the granted powers at any time.

Some GM characters have Empowerment that is off the scale, capable of permanently granting various powers with virtually unlimited levels for as long as they wish.

Stunts

Extensive Empowerment: The empowerment lasts for as long as you wish, or until you recind it.

Limits

One Type: You can only grant certain types of powers, like only Energy Control powers.

Transferal: The only powers you can grant are other powers *you* have, and you lose levels equal to the amount you grant someone else.

Unstable: Any powers you grant automatically have the Unstable limit and may go out of control.

EVOLUTION

Alteration: You have the ability to shift "backwards" or "forwards" along the evolutionary scale at will, transforming yourself into either a primitive caveman or a scrawny humanoid with an enlarged head. (This is "comic book" evolution, *not* hard science.) The exact appearance of both evolutionary selves is left up to the player and the GM.

Primitive

If you shift "backwards," you become a primitive Neanderthal or ape-man with Intellect 1 and Strength equal to your Evolution level (or normal Strength +1). In addition, the primitive gains *one* of the following: two appropriate specialties such as Athletics, Martial Arts (brawling), Mental Resistance, Stealth,

or Wrestling; or a Strike attack at a bonus equal to the Evolution level, or Prehensile Feet, which are usable as hands like the Extra Arms power.

Futuristic

If you shift "forwards," you become a futuristic being with an enlarged head, Strength 1, and Intellect equal to your Evolution level (or your normal Intellect +1). In addition, the future-being gains either two appropriate specialties based around advanced knowledge, or one Mental or Sensory Power equal to the Evolution level (chosen when the Evolution power is taken). You can gain additional Mental or Sensory powers as stunts.

Stunts

Evolutionary Modification: You can transform into different evolutionary forms, varying the abilities of each. So you can choose the optional abilities of the form each time you transform.

Evolutionary Summoning: Instead of transforming into an evolutionary form, you *summon* some or all of them to your side as separate beings, as if you had Duplication.

Primordial Form: You gain a third evolutionary form: a pre-evolutionary protoplasmic blob like a human-sized amoeba. This protoplasmic form has Intellect and Willpower 1, but Corrosion, Invulnerability, and Stretching equal to your Evolution level.

Limits

One Direction: You can evolve either backwards or forwards, but not both.

NEMESIS

Alteration: You have the power to analyze any single opponent's traits and instantly generate a power or powers (and appropriate stunts) that can counter or defeat that opponent.

Roll a Nemesis (Willpower) test against an opponent in visual range. If you succeed, you gain the power or powers (as determined by the GM) best able to defeat that opponent. If you fail, nothing happens, although you can try again on the following page. No power gained in this fashion can exceed the Nemesis power's level, though it may be of a lesser level.

Changing opponents takes your panel, during which time you cannot use other powers, as your power adapts to your new opponent. In addition, powers gained via Nemesis fade immediately following combat or the removal of the threat, at the determination of the GM.

Stunts

Instant: Your Nemesis power adapts instantly to a new opponent as a reaction. It does not take any preparation to change opponents.

Limits

Overload: If you fight more than one opponent concurrently, your Nemesis power overloads and doesn't work against anyone until you face only one foe.

SERVANT

Control: You can create or summon a creature to serve you. Your servant has Strength equal to your power level, total Prowess and Coordination equal to your power level, and Stamina equal to their Strength. They have no mental abilities and only act to carry out your commands. You must concentrate to command your servant.

Generally, your servant has two powers equal to your power level; it can gain another by reducing Strength to 0. Common powers are offensive, defensive (particularly Damage Resistance), and movement.

The GM approves all servants and can veto any unsuitable concepts. Villains often have this power at a level off the scale (*ICONS*, p. 5), and are able to call upon legions of servants or minions in a way unsuitable for heroes.

Stunts

Enhanced: Your servant gains Prowess and Coordination equal to your power level, rather than dividing your power level between the two abilities.

Extra Servant: You have two servants of the same type. Each time you add this stunt, you gain an extra servant.

Sensory Link: You can perceive through the senses of your servant, seeing and hearing everything they do.

Split: You can divide your power level amongst multiple servants; rather than summoning one at level 8, for example, you could summon four, level 2 servants.

SPATIAL CONTROL

Control: Spatial Control allows you to stretch and twist the dimensions of space within extended range. You can lengthen or compress distances, and warp topography. Effects last as long as you concentrate. Choose one of the following effects; you can acquire the others as stunts:

Compress Distances: You and others can move through the area as if you had Super-Speed equal to your Spatial Control level.

Stretch Distances: You reduce speed of movement through the area by your power level.

Twist Space: You twist space, causing disorientation; anyone within the area must make a Coordination (Spatial Control) test to avoid losing an action while they get their bearings. You can cause anyone moving through the

(continued on page 56)

The future of tabletop gaming

By Ethan Gilsdorf

Before the Internet. Before cell phones, smart phones and other mobile devices. Before the proliferation of video games. Before the world got complicated.

I am tempted to say it was a simpler time then, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when I first learned to play *Dungeons & Dragons* and other roleplaying games. But we know that no time is ever simple. So perhaps it is more accurate to say that those days were an easier time. Easier to be entranced. Easier to commit to a passion. Easier to suspend one's disbelief and to be obsessed. Easier to be fully engaged in an activity like *D&D* that requires a significant rallying of various forces: imagination, creativity, focus, and that most precious of resources — hours of your day or night. Your time.

Because who has time today? No one, it seems. We are all so busy.

Now that *D&D* is on the cusp of celebrating its 40th birthday (the groundbreaking game was brought into this world in 1974) and now that we can say *D&D* has touched at least two generations of players, its quiet shock wave coming to affect nearly every node of geek and pop culture, the time has come to reflect on its legacy. And the publication of this debut issue of *Gyax* magazine strikes me as an opportunity to evaluate the role of *D&D* and other RPGs in the digital age. (Note: From here on out, when I write “*D&D*,” let that abbreviation stand for whatever similar game strikes sparks of recognition in your brain: *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Gamma World*, *Boot Hill*, *Empire of the Petal Throne*, *Vampire: The Masquerade*, *Pathfinder*, etc.)

To explore the present place of *D&D* in our culture, and its possible future, let us examine the past.

To tell this story, we must set the way-back machine to the 1970s, a.k.a., the hangover from the Sixties. All that hope of societal change and interplanetary exploration was tossed out with assassinations, violence, and war. Nixon resigned, rock began to die, and disco rose. Evel Knievel stunt-cycled himself across the decade. These seismic shifts echoing from the counterculture brought us nostalgic time-trips called *Happy Days* and *Little House on the Prairie*, the quasi-conspiratorial *Six Million Dollar Man* and the wish-fulfillment fancy of *Fantasy Island*. The early Seventies opened minds to roleplaying, trying out new clothes, and new ways of living. Drugs, psychedelia, and heavy metal suggested the presence of other worlds. Led Zeppelin wrote of Middle-earth as if it was a real place where they

recently adventured.

The era was ripe for *D&D*.

In my experience of the 1970s, as someone who witnessed all these shifts as a kid, the era was marked by unbridled downtime. Bored time. Waiting time. Waiting for a parent to come home, or to be picked up by a parent, or for a parent to finish grownup business. Of course, there were no cell phones. No iPads. To check in with home base, you would call from a friend's house, if you called at all. If you were in town or at the mall, you'd call from a payphone. If you ran out of dimes, you were stuck. Therefore, I spent many hours alone, indoors, and roaming the outdoors: biking, swimming, and sledding unsupervised, and exploring the hundreds of acres of woods, streams, bogs, and sandpits that surrounded my house. I walked barefoot. I built tree forts. I played with firecrackers, model planes, and Lego. I didn't wear a helmet. And read a lot of books: *The Great Brain*, *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, *Encyclopedia Brown*, and *My Side of the Mountain*. Books with child or teen (or rodent) protagonists going on adventures. No soccer practice. No violin lessons. No being shuttled about endlessly to after school programs of questionable merit. I was trained to make my own fun.

In those days, the reach of the entertainment-media complex was limited. Nothing could quite absorb our time and brain-scape the way computers and video games do today. There was limited access to the present-day avenues for escape we now accept as the new normal and reality. VCRs, movie rentals, home video games, and PCs were only in their infancy. Other than books, of course, only TV could divert and colonize your mind, for hours on end. But the quality and verisimilitude of these visual media were lacking. Special effects seemed primitive, but our bar for believing was also lower. Net effect: The imagination was better. Imagination was still king.

Even before I stumbled upon *D&D*, I had begun to teach myself the tools of storytelling. In addition to trash-TV after-school re-runs, I was raised on a steady diet of *Creature Double Feature*, an afternoon monster-movie program slotted right after the Saturday morning cartoons. I learned, via osmosis, how to extend the stories in my mind. I could conjure legions of reanimated corpses that would clearly, one day, erupt from the local cemetery. I would scheme the movements of giant, irradiated

ants that would crush our town. Even before I learned about *D&D*, I'd narrate the story of how my friends and I would defeat them all and restore order to our little world. All of these creatures, plots, imagined gore, and destruction would happily infect that murky dream-space between play and the real world, between faint TV signals and our vivid imaginations. The realm of the possible sometimes felt more real than reality itself.

A product of all these influences—lackadaisical supervision, weird pop culture, a penchant for fantasizing—I was being primed for geekdom by some secret force. Then came the summer of 1977. I was 10, going on 11, when I saw *Star Wars* in the theater. My eyes were blasted open. What was this? A teenager, Luke Skywalker, on another planet who had some mysterious destiny to face and fulfill? And he got to dog-fight in spaceships? And swing a light saber? And hang out with robot sidekicks? *Whoa*. I remember staying up late after seeing *Star Wars*, feverishly drawing space ships. Suddenly, I wanted to be a filmmaker. A storyteller. I began to dream big. In 1978, I saw Ralph Bakshi's ill-fated, animated adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*—like *Star Wars*, also cutting-edge in its use of technology and special effects.

As I said, in many ways it was an easier age — easier to believe in flights of fantasy. Suddenly, fantasy felt real. Physical. Palpable. Experienced.

Then came *D&D*.

I was first introduced to *D&D*, in 1979, by my next-door neighbor. Recall, there was no *D&D* wiki to consult. There were no online communities to connect me to some exterior support group. There was simply a *D&D Basic* boxed set, or a stack of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* tomes, and a friend who knew this new, strange, and wondrous game was and how to play it. And play I did. I consumed the game, and it rapidly consumed me. My susceptibility to *D&D* was also encouraged by near-fatal character flaws: I was shy, introverted, and otherwise anti-social. I was raised in an emotionally treacherous home whose foundations seemed to be disintegrating around me. I needed a focus, a place to become lost, to become obsessed by a single thing. *D&D*—the ultimate combination of reading, storytelling, drawing, fantasy, geek knowledge, and imagination—was the clincher. I was hooked.

I was also yearning to belong to a gang, a group, a team of my own people. To win. And



I finally did. I played a lot of *D&D*. I found my first fellowship of friends. I began to socialize. We played every Friday night from 5 pm to 11 pm, eighth grade till senior year in high school. From 1979 to 1984, I was under *D&D*'s spell. The members of our "D&D gang" quickly grew accustomed to this idea of role-playing different, more daring versions of our selves. By becoming these characters—sneaky hobbits, stalwart paladins, and fire-wielding wizards—we were in control. Like actors in a play, our little band of nerds could do things in-game we only dreamed of in real life.

But beyond its psychological and social benefits, *D&D* almost felt subversive. In a world whose technologies were about to bring untold wealth of visual stimuli (a harbinger of things to come: during this time, my buddies and I were also learning to crudely program our school's TRS-80 computers), *D&D* offered, and still offers, a radical counter-attack.

You work with paper and pencils, not pixels. Imagination is the play-scape, assisted by graph-paper maps, miniature figurines of orcs and hobbits, and an impartial referee called a "dungeon master," who moderates an improvisational story with a group pretending to be a fellowship of dwarven warriors and half-elf wizards. Players toss polyhedral dice and consult tomes of rules to determine outcomes of actions. Like in real life, what you could do in-game is determined by a set of (fantasy) rules – and the roll of the dice. There are rules, but also chance. Roll a 20 on a 20-sided die and even if you are a lowly first-level fighter, you might strike a death-blow to a powerful foe like a dragon.

There is no uniform. No local business

needs to sponsor your *D&D* group. There are no cheerleaders, and no instant replay.

My world at home was careening out of control. But in the world of *D&D*, there was hope. *D&D* let me feel powerful. My buddies and I spent a lot of time in our bedrooms, playing with our, ahem, dice. We did our time in the dungeon. And we began to feel a little badass. At the time, *D&D* was even a threat to the mortal souls of American youth. Religious conservatives were convinced the game turned players into suicide-prone devil-worshippers. Which meant *D&D*, like countless social forces before it—the telephone, comic books, rock music, heavy metal—had become a threat to the status quo. Which meant the game had arrived, fought, and conquered.

Like most fads, *D&D* soon went from being the "hot" Christmas gift that many American boys (and sadly, it was mostly boys) desired in the 1980s to falling out of favor. Arcade video games like *Asteroids*, *Defender*, *Galaga*, and *Robotron: 2084*, and computer games like *Zork*, *Zelda*, *Quake*, and *Doom*, began to replace *D&D* as go-to escapes. In the late 1990s came the Internet. Then came Nintendo. We know this history.

And so a prehistoric paper-and-pencil game like *D&D* shouldn't survive in this age of digital media, right? Who wants to spend hours scrawling dungeons in graphite on aqua-graph paper and dreaming up elaborate backstories to kingdoms and curses, when endless imaginative realms are available off the shelf, plug and play? Now we can consume any narrative we want at light speed—via cable, DVD, Netflix, YouTube, Hulu—on our theater-quality

flat screens, and even in 3D. Video-game platforms have become as commonplace as the card tables and Monopoly boards of yore. Via the Wii, families bowl and snowboard and sing karaoke together. How can *D&D* compete against all this digital eye candy? On superficial terms, of course it can't. That's why the direct reach and sales of *D&D* and similar fantasy RPGs peaked in the 1980s and early 1990s, just as digital culture spread like a pox across the land.

Yet, *D&D* and its ilk left their mark, carving a huge gaping channel connecting myriad waterways of entertainment media. Since its birth in 1974, an estimated 20 million people have played *D&D* and spent \$1 billion on its products. Many former players have gone on to become titans of Hollywood and explorers of Silicon Valley. Virtually every computer coder once dabbled in the game. Which explains why so many video games use a "run through a dungeon and kill monsters" premise, and borrow the open-ended storytelling concepts pioneered by *D&D*. The tropes of leveling-up, collecting experience points, and roleplaying a character or avatar—"Ha! I will strike the She-orc with my +3 broad sword!"—have formed the foundation of virtually every video game on the market. Without tabletop RPGs, MMOs would not exist (nor would *Angry Birds*). We would not have Facebook or online dating—all popular and diluted forms of role-playing—were it not for *D&D*. Ahead of many other forms of entertainment, *D&D* blazed the trail through dark dungeons dark, helping make the world safe for fantasy and geek culture, *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

From the fringes, *D&D* shot out its tendrils, now that generations of former players have grown up and come out of the basement to attest to *D&D*'s powers. Film director Jon Favreau, professional basketball player Tim Duncan, and comedian Stephen Colbert are among those who once played; actors Vin Diesel and Wil Wheaton still play; and all profess the positive impact of *D&D* on their creative souls. The game can be seen as a common "nerd experience" that taught millions of geeks to socialize, empathize, level-up (in game and in real life) and emerge from the basements of their solitude to tell heroic stories. Now in their 30s, 40s, and 50s, these geeks have shown their quality. They forge and hew the media you now consume: movies, television, music, novels, art and, of course, video games. *D&D* is like crack for creative people: artists, writers, performers, musicians, filmmakers, and poets all draw from its waters. They are generations of creators now telling the biggest stories. And for that, they're thanking *D&D*.

As one gamer told me "*D&D* is the secret handshake in Hollywood today."

Which brings us to the present of RPGs. And the future.

At times, I worry. *D&D* taught me so much. Do video games also teach the same imagination and storytelling to kids, teens, and college aged-folk – the sweet-spot demographic that has always formed the core of *D&D* players? Can they muster the skills of time and imagination in an age that succeeds in distracting us from what matters and from each other?

I am trying not to be simply nostalgic for a lost age. I didn't play *D&D* for a while—some 25 years—but now, at age 45, I'm playing again. My experience of *D&D* isn't simply a memory, and I keep that nostalgia largely at bay. (And, incidentally, I play *D&D* with local friends but also with a friend who lives three times zones away, via Skype, and sometimes we text each other during the game and check our email. We are not pure.)

While I still play, I am reminded of what value the game has and can still have in the digital age. To my mind, all this make-believe derring-do and heroic yarn-spinning can actually be a transformative act.

For one, *D&D* changes lives. As a kid, I was not only teaching myself shoddy draftsmanship and baby-step acting, I also learned to be social, collaborative, and to create a community. What a foreign feeling that was, to be part of a gang of guys who got me. Strength in numbers. Suddenly, I wasn't alone. My days crawling in dungeons had actually taught me how to have friends. I learned how to be a leader. How to be curious, and interested in history, languages, cultures, puzzles. How to empathize and negotiate with "the other," or those not like me: orcs, elves, tavern keepers, undead kings, jocks, and prom queens. How to think creatively, solve problems, figure things

out, think out of the box. How to manage and predict. How to organize and plan. *D&D* is about achieving a mutual and collaborative goal and being part of a collective experience. You can't help but feel camaraderie, fellowship, and belonging – all the things I needed most as a shy, self-conscious kid who was not about to get those experiences from other, more macho activities like team sports.

Thinking back on the hundreds of hours spent in the thrall of *D&D*, I am reminded of a part of my creative imagination that I lost touch with along the way – the idea that you can make your own entertainment.

D&D remains a do-it-yourself, low-tech, largely non-commercial pastime. You don't need gadgets or expensive equipment. The game doesn't burn electricity or gas or batteries. No monthly fees or (un)necessary upgrades. You're forced to interact with each other, to be present and face-to-face (not face in our iPhones or computer screens). With *D&D*, all you need is some dice, graph paper, rule books, pencils, and provisions. In this way, *D&D* is a subversive, even revolutionary, fight against the status quo of entertainment in America.

In a world where we are inundated with innumerable pleas to buy the latest technology and ways to spend our time and money to be entertained, RPGs present a realm mostly free from corporate influences, marketing pitches and merchandizing. You're not consuming or passively watching some story on TV or at the movies. You make the game yourself. You must create. You draw, sketch, map, plot. You and your friends generate a fantasy experience rather than merely absorb one. It's you who tells the story. *D&D* still lingers in the culture, I think, because it's a crucial link to other individualized, user-driven, human-scaled creative spaces separate from the intrusion of commercial forces.

All this is hugely important and immeasurably powerful. And for these reasons, I am hopeful about the future of *D&D* and other tabletop, role-playing games. Self-publishing and internet distribution means more gaming products are available than ever before. Are some of the merchandise borderline gimmicky or desperate to lure those addicted to the screen with virtual tabletops and other digital geegaws? Sure. But by and large, I think we're experiencing a quiet renaissance in tabletop games. Partly, this is being driven by 30- and 40-something former gamers (like myself) feeling a desire to reclaim some aspect of their younger, gamer selves and in-game heroics. Or they have children and want to pass on that gaming experience to their offspring.

Also driving the surge is our reaction to the impersonality of technology. The more we feel trapped by our computers and Wi-Fi connections, the more we will crave "real," face-to-face experiences and, ironically, fantasy games can sate this desire. Just look at the widespread acceptance and popularity of LARPing, fan

fiction, costuming and cosplay, Renaissance faires, and other hobbies that are as much about hanging out and talking as they are about crafting something real.

The best news for adult gamers is that grown-ups can often do a better job playing *D&D* than teens. Back in the day, my gaming buddies and I fought about rules. A lot. I recall many a power struggle as we grappled with becoming young men – like jocky antics on the ball field, we indulged ourselves in trash talking, the equivalent to endless arguments over who was safe and who was out, except with about 10 hardcovers as the umpire's rulebooks. Now as an adult player, I can just enjoy the story and the adventure. I'm less persnickety about the rules, or who is right and who is wrong. I want to simply get lost in the narrative.

Is it harder to find time for that weekly game night, that uninterrupted, immersive, six-hour block of time I once had? Sure. But when I (and the other members of my group) can find it, *D&D* helps me recapture something I lost – that open-ended, anything-can-happen experience. Grown-ups don't often get to be creative in this way, nor to have this kind of free-range fun anymore. *D&D* matters today because it's really one of the few activities left that lets us all be storytellers and reunites us with our storytelling past. I don't want to imagine a world without self-made stories. Without heroes. A world where only Hollywood tells us how we can have a good time. I love Peter Jackson's vision, and I am as entranced by immersive games like *Skyrim* as the next geek, but it's essential to recognize what these movies and games also take from us.

D&D will survive because it taps into humankind's innate sense of wonder, its thirst for danger, and its curiosity about magic, dark forces, and the unknown. The "what is not there." The "what cannot be explained." The "what should not be possible." In our real world, where else is there to explore? Google Earth and science explain every square foot of every mystery. Like religion, *D&D* says there's still unexplained phenomena in the world. And, even if it's an imaginary world, you still have a role to play: to be the hero, to have a fate and an imprint bigger than you'd have in real life. And maybe, once you've ended the game session, you'll feel more heroic in the so-called real world.

I leave you with this final thought: To keep *Dungeons & Dragons* alive and kicking, adult gamers need to pass its magic on to the next generation. Make your kids put down their devices. Tell them a story and how to tell stories. Teach your children that what happens in their minds is more powerful than anything Warner Bros., Electronic Arts or Apple can throw at them – because in *D&D* those stories also take place in the collective minds of those gathered around a table, a pile of dice and a bowl of Cheetos. ■

The Gygax family storyteller

by Ernest Gary Gygax Jr.

*Once there was a mean old man, as mean as he could be.
He hated cats and dogs and kids like you and me.
He kept a little old butcher shop just right across the street,
And he'd grind up little cats and dogs to make his sausage
meat.*

– “Old Charlie Rubeck and His Wicked Old Grinding Machine”

This little tune was a standard warming up tactic of my father, E. Gary Gygax (which had been sang to himself as a young lad) that he used in an attempt to quiet us all down and eventually tell one of his own off-the-cuff fantasies that would send us peacefully into dreamland. With my sisters Elise and Heidi, and very soon baby Cindy being added to the fold, it took my father a great deal of time and communication to single any particular night's tale down to its own participative creation. “Charlie Rubeck and the Tale of his Wicked Old Grinding Machine” was only one of many preparatory bag of tricks that had been passed on to him by his own father, Ernest, as well as a friendly senior member of the neighboring

Raasch family. What young Gary had been given as a lad was the enjoyment of stories written by popular writers of the time. From a very early age, he discovered the wide open vistas of pulp magazines, which he read as many as he could afford, and used the library and any other tools to find older tales – all of which are listed in the back of the *Dungeon Masters Guide* (1st Ed. 1979). This he also passed on to us, with selected stories of his own choosing, trying to captivate the mixed audience of both his then only son and his expanding wealth of daughters. He started with stories from the *Blue and Green Book of Faerie Tales*, and he shared *The Hobbit* with us anew whenever a new child was old enough to understand what Poppa was reading. (Interesting enough, my father found the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy to be long-winded, and warned us that many people would try and get us to read them, but advised no more than one reading if we could even make it that far!)

What was even more wonderful about each

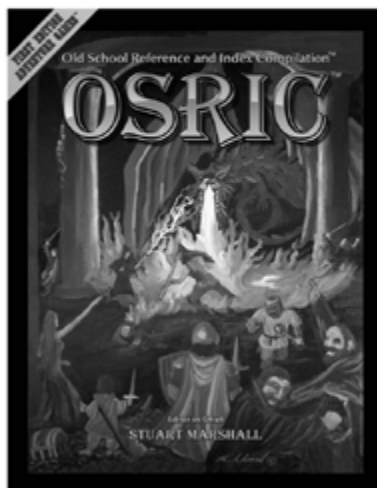
non-reading night's treat was that we would all get to chime in over the voices of our siblings, and set the background and outline of every adventure. Where my father had just been given other peoples work as a youth, he instead would create a new wonderful story off the top of his head. This was not done in a parliamentary manner, nor without our father throwing in false bits and tales for us to quietly listen to each time he would have to generate one really short story that we hadn't heard before, and then he would go back to the regular assortment of memorized stall tactics, which would end unanimously in screams of horror and unhappiness as he fed us more generic, silly tales such as “Orrum Tresses and the Trio of Bruins” (Goldie Locks and the Three Bears). Or he would say, “Once there was a little girl named Molly and she had a Dolly, so she hung it on the Walley and that is All-eee...” But then one of us would burst out, “No, no daddy tell us a long story!” So then he would say, “Once

(continued on page 57)

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Talents off the front line

By Dennis Detwiler



Realism and the horrors of World War II are the twin focuses of the *Godlike* role-playing game; as such, the game finds itself populated—as the war was, mostly—by white males. The 1940s was a different time, fraught with racism and sexism on a level that is difficult to imagine today. Bringing the interests of many races and both sexes to the *Godlike* game table, along with that realism, offers a bit of a challenge.

But there were other Talents besides the front-line soldiers – men and women of every race and creed who manifested powers and served on different fronts. Just like the real war, men and women of all types served and died for the cause of freedom.

Here are three options to expand the type of game that *Godlike* can be without throwing away the core principles of the concept.

“Duds” and Talent security

On January 1, 1942, during the Atlantic Charter meeting in Washington D.C., a German Talent agent insinuated himself onto the grounds of the White House, in an attempt to assassinate President Roosevelt, Prime Minister Churchill and various other members of the newly minted United Nations.

Luckily, two British Talents, Lloyd “Bulldog” Feit and Emil “The Shade” Broaden, were present when the German agent attempted to bypass a security checkpoint with his power. Parahumanly disguised as a US Army Captain, the German Talent was easily visible to the British Talents, who attempted to subdue him. Grabbing the German as he activated a large bomb in a valise, the Shade dragged the Nazi and the bomb out of phase with the physical world. When the weapon exploded silently at ten minutes to seven, only the German agent and the Shade were killed – the Shade’s power rendered the blast harmless to those in the normal physical world.

This audacious attack on the leaders of the

free world led to an increase in Talent security for VIPs. Churchill had been traveling with his security detail of Talents for more than six months at the time of the attack, and President Roosevelt was under the protection of the British Talent Bulldog since the Placentia Bay conference of the previous August; but suddenly, the Allies found themselves in a much more dangerous situation than before. Talents were now required at the front lines, to fend off enemy Talent attacks, and on the home front to root out and destroy enemy Talent spies, saboteurs, and agents . . . The president turned to S2 to solve the problem . . .

Shortly after the January 1st bomb-attack, American S2 scientists documented their first “dud” Talent. Private First Class Titus Macay, US Army, possessed the Talent ability to change any slop of Army food into a home-cooked, chicken fried steak – and that’s all. More and more of these “duds”—Talents with powers that were of questionable utility in warfare—began to appear as the war wore on, and S2 gradually realized their value in the months following the bomb attack.

Despite their odd and limited abilities, like all Talents, “duds” were able to detect and cancel the powers of other Talents. In fact, “duds” were usually particularly powerful when it came to the cancellation power, and were able to negate even the most powerful Talent attack leveled against them. Employed as security forces for VIPs and secure areas, “duds” provided a perfect defense, while freeing up the more powerful, offensive Talents for frontline service.

By late 1942, a large percentage of American and British “duds” were “rotated home” and conscripted into home-front defense forces, to prevent an attack like the *Paukensschlag* plot from happening again.

“Duds” offer a unique and fascinating view of the life of a Talent, as well as a great opportunity for bringing women and those of other

racers into gameplay. Defending New York from enemy Talent infiltration with a limited set of powers, rushing across London hunting a lone Nazi shape-changer who hopes to bend the tide of war through assassination, finding AWOL Allied Talents on the run and bringing them in – each situation offers a unique opportunity of gameplay not usually seen in *Godlike*.

S2 and the investigative “Snoop Squads”

Section Two, the American (and later Allied) attempt to study the super-men, spent much of the war locating, cataloging, and assigning Allied Talents to the various services. Talents with non-combat powers, or who were considered a “non combat,” could find assignment in such groups.

The Navy, Marines, and Army Air Corps (AAC) all did their best to keep what Talents they could lay their hands on, and some forces, like the Marines, often refused to report combat-manifestations to Washington command at all, in fear that those men would be recalled and reassigned.

The AAC utilized flying Talents as reconnaissance men, and then later, when flying Talents of extreme power began to appear in numbers, as escorts for bomber missions into Axis Europe to counteract the growing threat of Axis Talent attack in the air. Flyers, hyper-gunmen, and teleporters were especially sought after by the AAC, as well as Talent troops that could facilitate rapid construction of airfields in recently conquered territories.

The Marines, lost in the vastness of the Pacific, were not given significant numbers of Talents until late in the war, when America had overcome the hazards of the Japanese Navy. The brutal and relentless combat the Marines were subjected to in the South Pacific, however, produced many Talents. Few of these Talents reported their condition to the US—communication was difficult enough, and the thought of being recalled and reassigned to

the army sickened most Marines to the point of silence. After 1942, however, the Marines began to receive specially trained Marine Talent troops, indoctrinated at “Hell’s Motel,” Paris Island, South Carolina. This group, marked by their special “Pitchfork” patch, became known as the “Devil’s Own.”

The Navy was much more particular in its choice of Talents and looked only for those who could facilitate ship-to-ship combat, communication, and the transfer of fuel, goods, or personnel. Their favorite Talent type was the long-range, high-capacity teleport. Due to the limited numbers of Talents in the American Navy, it often received the personnel it requested. The Department of the Navy had, among other things, the President’s ear, as well as the power to vote against any group in the Talent Operation Command (TOC) who refused to assist them in their limited requests.

Gameplay in an S2 “Snoop Squad” gives entry to nearly any type of character outside the standard combat soldier. These groups are dispatched to sites of apparent Talent manifestation in Allied territory that seemingly have no source. Often, the new Talent *themselves* have no idea that they have a power. It is up to the Snoop Squad to locate and bring in the Talent. Sometimes, the Talent doesn’t *want* to come in, or they’re an enemy national, or worse, a mad Talent. This kind of gameplay can be fun and fascinating, and ID from the S2 opens many doors.

“Ghosts”

Near the end of the war, powerful Talents from disputed countries found themselves in the possession of governments who refused to simply let them go. Many were already waving particular flags, and it was easy to convert, say, a Czech super against the Communist cause that threatened to consume their country.

These unique individuals were folded into intelligence and assigned a code-name: Ghosts. Their lives were put on hold, as the opening feints of what would one day become the Cold War were played out across war-ravaged Europe between 1944 and 1945. There, clandestine operations of sabotage, kidnapping, and assassination played out behind the scenes while Russia and America shook hands for the cameras.

Ghosts can be assigned to nearly any task: murder a high-ranking German Officer before he can be moved to Moscow, without being detected; get a Polish scientist to the Greek frontier before the carpet bombing commences on the mountain; find Werner von Braun before the Russian agents can eliminate or teleport him back to the Soviet Union.

The opportunities in a Ghost campaign are limitless, bordered only by the growing conflict between each government and their allies; as such, the opportunity for subterfuge, backstabbing, and cleverness surpass the common *Godlike* game of gross combat. ■

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D&D past, now, and Next

by Michael Tresca

With all the talk of *Dungeons & Dragons Next* from Wizards of the Coast (WotC) being a backwards-compatible rules set that encompasses all previous editions of *Dungeons & Dragons*, the secret is out: it's not that hard to convert most versions of *D&D* to other versions of *D&D*. But behind such commonalities as the six ability scores, the base damage inflicted by a longsword, or the ability of wizards to shoot fireballs and clerics to heal, there are subtle traps lying in wait for the Dungeon Master (DM) who thinks he can just use an older *D&D* adventure without some significant work.

Miniatures

Let's start with the basics: miniatures. The original *D&D* boxed set was directly drawn from its predecessor, *Chainmail*. To say that miniatures were not part of the *D&D* experience is disingenuous; *D&D* owes its existence to miniature-based games. Gary Gygax recommended miniatures in *Men & Magic* ("if the players have them available and so desire"), but they were not required. Cardboard counters were given as an alternative, "although by themselves the bits of cardboard lack the eye-appeal of the varied and brightly painted miniature figures."

The decision to play with or without miniatures affects the design of adventures, because it firmly establishes a sense of place independent of the collective imagination of the group. Imagination is a fluid thing and in a shared gaming space it is defined at first by the DM and then by the players and their actions. One of my players learned this the hard way when he missed the description of a Type VI Demon amidst a laundry list of other foes, and his character was beheaded by the monster's lightning-shaped vortal sword.

The decision to not use miniatures diminishes the importance of a room's dimensions: height, width, and depth. This is not to say that positioning is unimportant, but rather that

the importance of characters in relation to each other takes on greater significance. Party order has always been a critical part of *D&D*, if only because of the all-pervasive traps that lurk around every corner. The player characters (PCs) in the front or back usually fell victim to traps, so the DM needed to know who was where in relation to each other, and thus in relation to the dungeon. It is perhaps a natural evolution that miniatures and maps evolved from *D&D* artifacts like mapping and marching order.

Chases, which are by their nature fluid affairs, are much easier to dictate narratively than with actual miniature movement. Playtesting *D&D Next* was an enlightening experience for players accustomed to maps and miniatures. When a purple worm barreled towards the characters, the PCs were free to move in different directions without concern to their exact location.

The PC-to-dungeon relationship was illustrated in a celebrity game at I-CON with Frank Mentzer. Frank had his character hang back over 100 feet away down a corridor in the dungeon. The mere fact he could have his character stay that far back was an attribute of older editions of *D&D* – using a tiled map in more recent editions, 100 feet would translate to 20 inches of valuable space that would not be wasted on a map consisting of five-foot squares! When a trap was triggered that caught most of the party, Frank's character was able to avoid it. The very assumptions of a five-foot-scaled map in later editions of *D&D* mean a dungeon would never be designed in such a fashion and, conversely, Frank's character would never have such freedom to avoid



the trap.

Fourth edition is the first edition to explicitly require an objective environment to function. Many of the class powers involve shifting, character proximity, and powers that affect allies and enemies in bursts. Although it's certainly possible to convert these powers to relative positions, some of them simply don't work as well without miniatures.

Conversion damage: Converting older editions to later editions fall prey to mutable space. The simple assumption that combat requires five feet of space for each character means that maps that don't allow this space are avoided by players who can see the map. Additionally, many older adventures allow up to 100 humanoids in a space where they could not possibly fit, let alone fight. Don't assume you can use the map without altering it to match, or reduce the number of monsters to fit.

Magic items

There was a time when *D&D* was firmly rooted in medieval warfare, which is why there was a gloriously detailed exposition on pole arms in *Unearthed Arcana*. History, at least to Gary Gygax, was an important part

of *D&D*, no doubt in part due to the game's original wargaming roots. So it helped if you knew about the construction of plate armor or the difference between a bec-de-corbin and a glaive-guisarme. On the other hand, this focus on historical authenticity often clashed with fantasy themes, such that the cost of full plate armor and its benefit to characters was out of sync with, say, a *potion of healing*.

As a result, magic item rarity and their power levels vary greatly between editions. By proxy, these magic items make magical classes less important for characters that have the financial means to purchase them. Whereas in earlier editions you needed a cleric in a party if you expected to heal in a dungeon, 3rd edition healing is just a *cure light wounds* potion or wand away.

Buying and creating magical items has inherent assumptions: they can be commoditized like any other product – bought, sold, and exchanged like common goods. This devalues their efficacy in some respects and certainly requires a campaign setting that is willing to allow for this kind of healing. Earlier *D&D* adventures often rewarded characters with generous amounts of magic items to make up for this deficiency.

The overall lethality of the game (see below) also meant that players of older editions had to prepare for every contingency, which resulted in the hoarding of magic items. By 4th edition it became gauche to have a “sack full of swords” covering every damage type. Many class powers flex to the circumstances, allowing players to rely on far fewer magic items.

Conversion damage: Magic items were often scattered throughout dungeons expressly for the players' benefit. Sometimes the monsters didn't even use the magic items that would clearly benefit them in combat, because they existed for the PCs to use, not for the monsters. Sometimes the magic items are tremendously powerful without rhyme or reason for their presence, or hidden randomly with the assumption that players would scour every inch of the dungeon to find them.

Player character power levels

The early editions of *D&D* explicitly created power curves unique to each class, with experience point requirements and power advancements that were their own rule systems. Taken to the extreme we have similar old school games like *Rifts*, where there are hundreds of unique classes with a dizzying variety of abilities, attributes, and powers. While this makes for an exciting character it can become a headache for DMs seeking to optimize the opposition.

This is at least in part because in older editions it was assumed the DM handled optimization on the fly. DMs were expected to ratchet up the difficulty when necessary and throttle back as combat and conditions dictated. There wasn't a need for balance between classes

because every classes' role was sharply defined across a campaign continuum. Wizards were weak because they became powerful later; fighters were linearly powerful but never really gained much in the way of interesting powers. The *D&D* framework inherently assumed that players were playing for some time and would see their more difficult power arcs “pay off” at later levels.

Game design theory has evolved since then, largely influenced by the hyperkinetic world of online game play where thousands of players come together in chaotic groups. Class design accelerated such that there is now an expectation of balanced powers, with every class offering a set of advantages and disadvantages. In a fragmented gaming system where there is no cohesive group that meets weekly, this design is necessary so that selection of the four archetypes (fighter, blaster, healer, sneaker) are spread out amongst the player base. In an in-person *D&D* campaign, players can agree ahead of time on their roles and accept the challenges that come with them. But facing a fragmented player base with no common ground to speak of, *D&D* and its descendants have moved towards flattening out power levels.

This design philosophy manifested in 4th edition, when WotC made the controversial decision to treat all powers and spells as a combination of in-game effects. A fighter could use a power to immobilize or slide a foe, or a spellcaster could use a spell – the effect would be fundamentally the same.

It should be noted that “epic” play as a concept harks back as far as Frank Mentzer's *Basic* version of *D&D*, with 21+ level play introduced in the *Master* rules set. 3rd edition introduced the *Epic Level Handbook*, but 4th edition has 20th through 30th level play as part of the Epic tier of gaming.

Conversion damage: Classes have changed drastically over time between editions. It used to be that the fighter was relatively straightforward to play, but that too has changed with 4th edition. *D&D Next* is moving in this direction as well, with powers that tweak how a fighter fights. Rogues have gone from specialized skill-users in earlier editions to just one of many in the skill-rich 3rd edition. Undead-turning by clerics changes from edition to edition, with drastically different rules for each. And of course arcane magic users vary simply because their spells change between editions. DMs should not assume that the 1st level wizard in their game will fare as well across all editions. Not all *magic missiles* are alike.

Monster power levels

The change in power levels affected monsters as well. In earlier editions, monsters were never particularly balanced against each other or against a party. They were simply created as necessary, with the DM assigning them to

the opposition as needed. The difficulty of a monster was assigned to the level of a dungeon, ranging from 1st level (the first level the PCs would explore in a dungeon) through 10th level (the 10th level down in the dungeon). Don Turnbull introduced a more sophisticated system in his *White Dwarf* series of “Monster-mark” articles using a 12-point system.

Third edition was the first edition to treat monsters like characters. All monsters were essentially races, and could be scaled up in power by adding a class. To accommodate non-player characters (NPCs), 3rd edition created character classes to fill narrative roles: Adept, Aristocrat, Commoner, Expert, and Warrior. Philosophically, this is elegantly simple – in practice, every monster is essentially another character that the DM has to create. While it's technically possible for a DM to populate a dungeon with 20th level kobold characters, he would spend considerable time rolling each one up.

Fourth edition retrenched somewhat in recognizing that the DM's time was limited. Monsters now have classes: Artillery, Brute, Controller, Leader, Lurker, Skirmisher, and Soldier. Additionally, these creatures are defined by power levels: minions, elite, and solo. Determining the opposition is no longer simply about what makes sense for the dungeon, but also the monster's power level relative to the PCs.

Conversion damage: Assumptions about monsters in older editions put confidence in the DM that either the PCs would flee overwhelming opposition or the DM would adjust the monsters accordingly. Low-level monsters that would only appear in large groups can appear



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singly in later editions with considerable power at their disposal. Just simply swapping out monsters with their similarly named counterparts can cause encounters of wildly fluctuating difficulty.

Randomized attributes

Before there were stats rerolls, point buys, and class bonuses to attributes, you just rolled 3d6 and let the dice fall where they may. If your DM was feeling generous he would let you assign the stats as you saw fit. If not . . . you ended up with whatever character you ended up with. This meant that many characters ended up being recycled or re-rolled endlessly until the right combination of attributes occurred.

This randomization was an integral part of *D&D*'s power structure. Races and classes had minimum and maximum requirements as a means of curbing power. Psionics had a random chance of spontaneously occurring with the right combination of attributes. Paladins were nigh-impossible for characters to become because they required minimum attributes. High Strength scores were further broken down into a percentage system to capitalize on the lucky roll. When you were lucky in *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, you were *really* lucky.

This same randomization meant characters regularly had attributes below 8. This

extended to NPCs as well, who would often have a cripplingly weak attribute. They were rolled just as randomly as the PCs.

Conversion damage: Using characters as-is from one version of *D&D* to the next has its own challenges, but even simply using the statistics can cause some dissonance in design philosophy between editions. Point-bought, optimized characters in more recent editions will have an advantage in older adventures and vice versa.

Lethality

It's a common assumption that *D&D* adventures for earlier editions were deadlier. Monsters were positioned in dungeons with no other motivation than to kill the party; traps were laid for the express purpose of tricking PCs into dying; and some monsters made no sense other than to act as a means of vexing players: gelatinous cubes, rust monsters, trappers, goldbugs, etc. In short, life in *D&D* was nasty, brutish, and short.

But one major element missing from this oft-repeated myth is that many of the adventures published for *D&D* were originally intended for competitive play. Deadly? Absolutely, but it's an unfair accusation, on par with comparing an Olympic decathlon to an obstacle course in your backyard. The expectation is that professionals are trained to handle the

challenges.

This competitive philosophy had a way of weeding out players. *D&D* dungeon crawls became marathons in which players treated every square foot like a tactical combat, poking walls, ceilings, and floors with ten-foot poles lest they be caught unawares. The very purpose of the thief was to circumvent these traps or disable them. This made mapping paramount, because the map could reveal clues to hidden rooms and traps. It also slowed the game down considerably.

On the other hand, earlier games were adapted from wargames which had up to 20 players at a time. Lethality wasn't so much an issue as it was a means of cycling through characters. *D&D* was as much a competition as it was a blood sport.

Over time, this changed. Adventures became less about killing monsters in dungeons and more about telling an interesting tale. Monsters were placed a little more logically in a dungeon, traps were laid sparingly, and not every adventurer was assumed to be kitted out with everything from a mirror to a signal whistle to an ear cone. By 3rd edition, characters became less functional and more stylistic, birthing the "Dungeonpunk" art style.

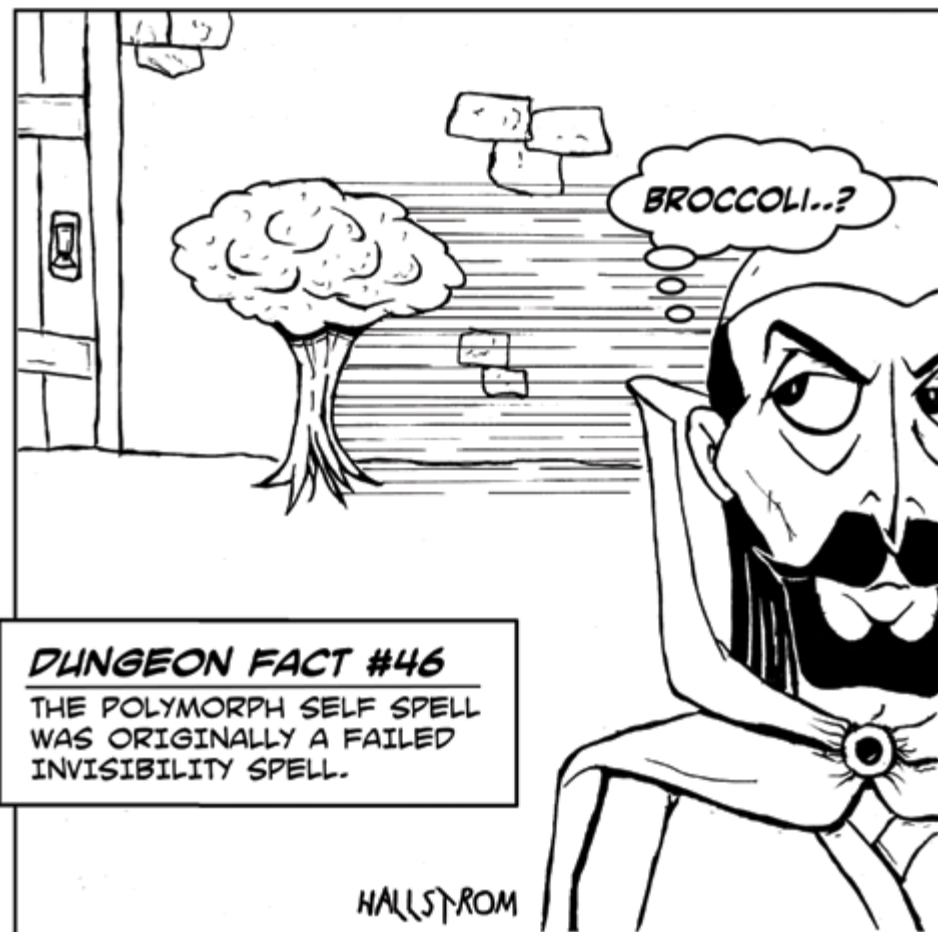
Healing affects design, too. The assumption that players would have to camp out in a dungeon often meant that adventures had "camping areas" for players to hold up. Dungeon crawls were expeditions, with PCs expected to live in the dungeon to heal, memorize spells, and recuperate. This became less and less of an issue by 4th edition, with many powers positioned to be used once per encounter instead of once a day.

Conversion damage: Players from recent editions who have never played in competitive adventures are in for a lethal surprise. Not only is every doorknob, gold piece, and floor potentially a trap, the entire dungeon is designed to kill the PCs. Giving the PCs a heads up is a good idea, but dungeon-exploring tactics are not easily learned. Additionally, camping was a form of tactical advantage that dungeons specifically sought to thwart since it allowed the party to essentially start fresh with a new crop of spells. Wandering monsters, often completely out of sync with the party's power level, could easily blunder into the PCs or vice versa. Adventurers need to be on their guard every waking and sleeping moment!

One of *D&D Next*'s explicit goals is to allow players to play any older version of *Dungeons & Dragons* with one rule set. But even if *D&D Next* technically allows play to scale up and down for each edition, it's not simply a matter of converting characters or monsters from one adventure to another. Hopefully this article illustrates that there are fundamentally different philosophies that influenced how those games were designed. Stripping away their statistics, the fingerprints of their creators still linger. Alter them at your own risk. ■

DUNGEON 101

by Glen Hallstrom



Gnatdamp

A sanctuary in the swamp

by Michael Curtis



All adventurers, whether their exploits take them into dungeon depths or across the sprawling wilderness, need safe havens to recoup their bodies and replenish their supplies. These “home bases” run the gamut from building-choked cities to tiny hamlets, with each offering their own services and dangers. This article introduces one such sanctuary, a small swamp village perched on the verge of the frontier.

Known as Gnatdamp, this village is presented in a system-neutral format, allowing for its use with a number of different game systems. Suggested classes and levels are given for some of the village’s more prominent members. Game masters can easily incorporate the material presented here into their campaign worlds, utilizing the settlement as a base of operations for the adventurers, a destination to flee to when their enemies wax too great in number, or merely a rest point on their way to better and brighter destinations.

Overview

The village of Gnatdamp lies perched along the western bank of the River Ahkyl, a major waterway winding through the Murkmire swamp. Occupied by an estimated 200 full-time residents, Gnatdamp began life as a pair of crude buildings erected on a bend in the river, where dry hummocks and the once-deep waters provided a natural meeting place for hunters who earned their livings off the meat and hides of the swamp’s wildlife, and the rare prospector who ranged Murkmire in search of bog iron deposits. The settlement’s name arose from the prevalent wet conditions of the swamp and the clouds of stinging flies and gnats drawn to the area by the butchered animal carcasses that lined the riverbank, awaiting the arrival of river-going traders.

Since its humble origins more than eight decades ago, Gnatdamp has grown from a hunters’ outpost to a small village occupied by those with nothing left to lose and nowhere else to go. The residents of Gnatdamp include fugitive criminals, escaped slaves, men and women with bounties on their heads, failed merchants seeking a last ditch means of earning coin, and desperate adventurers endeavoring to pull lost riches from the murky waters of the surrounding marsh.

The muddy ground along the riverbank makes for poor foundations and more than half of Gnatdamp’s buildings are constructed atop thick pilings driven deep into the sodden earth. Walkways and platforms of wood—mostly rough planks hewn from the copses of elm, ash, and swamp oak, found in the surrounding bog or scavenged from the mired wrecks of ships run aground on the shoals that plague the River Ahkyl—connect the buildings and serve as quays leading into the deeper waters of the harbor. On average, these platforms and paths rise three feet above the wet ground.

Only a handful of village buildings are constructed directly on the ground, perched on dry hummocks west of the riverbank. The buildings of Gnatdamp are largely of wooden construction, fabricated from the same crude timbers as the boardwalks, but a few are fashioned from bricks of sun-dried river mud. Roofs are thatched, made from bundles of reeds that grow in abundance along the river. After dark, brands of rushes and coal-filled braziers provide flickering illumination along the boardwalks, which help mitigate, but not entirely eliminate, the chances of visitors making a misstep in the night and falling off into the mud or water below.

Gnatdamp is a somber community, both in coloration and attitude. Gray-green moss clings to timbers stained black by the constant dampness. Tea-brown water fills the harbor and scummy pools litter the ground. The few remaining trees within the village boundaries are cloaked in “witch’s beard” — straggly, wooly tendrils of gray moss that turns bone-white with age, giving them a sinister demeanor. Aside from the rare minstrel’s song drifting from the Bloated Leech, the only music heard in Gnatdamp is the endless croaking of frogs and the screams of something dying in the swamp.

The residents of Gnatdamp are gruff and stoic in their dealings with outsiders, and an “us against everyone else” mentality permeates the village. Visitors to the community are referred to as “dryboots” by the Gnatdampers, spoken with the same mixture of contempt and distrust as the term “city slicker.” The villagers dress in homespun and leather, and most are dirty from work or simply disinterested in personal hygiene. An inordinate number bear scars or disfigurement from the harsh lives they lived prior to their arrival in Gnatdamp. More than a few villagers are plagued by addictions to alcohol or cheap narcotics.

Gnatdamp’s population is profoundly male, with one woman for every five men living in the village. Children are in the minority, numbering less than a dozen throughout the entire community. Gnatdamp’s adult population is mature; young adults pursue better options available to them and the old are too weak to survive the swamp for long. The racial makeup of Gnatdamp, although far from homogenous, is skewed towards humanity, with representatives of numerous regions in attendance. Demi-humans are much rarer in the village, as it typically takes truly nefarious deeds or failures to be completely ostracized from their closely-knit communities; only demi-humans guilty of unpardonable crimes drift into Gnatdamp to assume new lives.

Daily life in Gnatdamp

One might expect a community comprised largely of criminal fugitives and ne’er-do-wells to be a stew pot of violence and inequity, but Gnatdamp shatters those expectations. Per-

haps it is because the residents realize that their survival and freedom are dependent on remaining unnoticed by those devoted to hunting down outlaws and bringing the burning light of civilization and respectability to dens of sin. Although bloodshed and disorder is not unheard of in Gnatdamp, for the most part the inhabitants engage in their sins quietly.

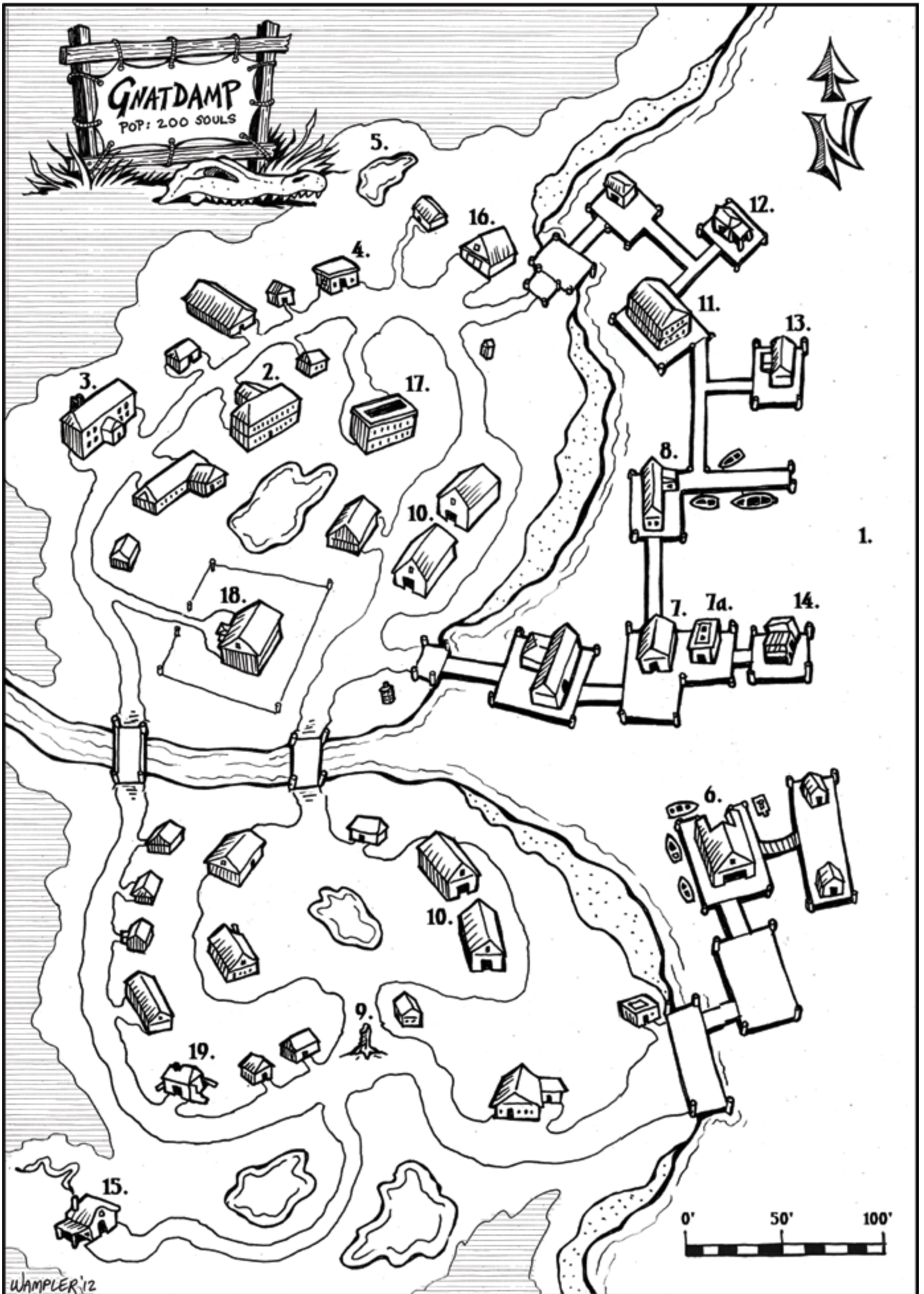
Also surprising is Gnatdamp’s faithfulness towards the community at large. Gnatdampers live quiet lives of self-imposed isolation, but when outside forces threaten even a small portion of the population, the residents come together in a display of fierce solidarity. Part of this attitude derives from the “we must stand together or hang alone” mentality shared by Gnatdamp’s hunted residents, but it also owes its existence to sheer survival instinct. Life is hard in Gnatdamp and it takes great fortitude, stoicism, and cooperation to survive long in the harsh environment of the swamp. Since so many of the villagers have no other options in life, their only alternative is to band together or die.

The average Gnatdamper ekes out a living either from the River Ahkyl or the Murkmire swamp. Fishing, crabbing, shellfishing, and hunting provide the residents with food for both sustenance and trade purposes. Most residents who survive on the swamp’s bounty own small boats, either skiffs for plying the river, or flat-bottomed boats, rafts or canoes to navigate the smaller, shallower creeks of the swamp. These boats line the shores north and south of the village, and nets and traps in various states of repair adorn the exterior of the homes in Gnatdamp. Hides stretched on drying frames, animal skulls, drying bundles of herbs, and animal carcasses are also commonplace throughout the village, marking the residences of the more daring native who earn their livelihoods deeper in the swamp.

Less common but more vital to daily life in Gnatdamp are the few villagers with trade skills. A boatwright, smith, and tanner practice their trades in the village, serving both the community and the traders and travelers navigating the river. Gnatdamp’s inn, boarding house, provisioners, tavern, several warehouses, butcher, and fishmonger comprise the remaining services available to outsiders.

Luxuries are rare in Gnatdamp and the scant amount that are traded in the village arrive via river merchants. Those that deal along the river know that quality weapons, fresh vegetables, rugged clothing, common spices, liquors, coal, salt, and lamp oil have the largest demand in Gnatdamp, and they laden their ships accordingly when making their circuits up and down the river. Deals are mostly bartering affairs, with the river merchants taking tanned hides, preserved meat, the eggs of swamp beasts, and bog iron in return for their wares, but there is a minority of relatively affluent Gnatdampers who deal in hard coin.

Besides the usual traders, specialty mer-



WAMPLER '12

chants travel to Gnatdamp to acquire exotic herbs and flowers found only in the swamp and are highly desired by alchemists, sorcerers, and the witch markets of large cities. A market for honey products has recently exploded in Gnatdamp and merchants arriving with both mead and raw honeycomb are trading them at a high profit margin. Both products are bought in great quantities by the froggish-folk that come to Gnatdamp to trade. Having discovered the pleasures of mead, it's become a popular drink amongst their kind. Raw honeycomb is prized as candy. The froggish-folk leave the honeycomb out in the swamp air where it quickly acquires a coating of insects lured by the sweetness and they become mired in the sticky honey. These insect-covered delights are

enjoyed as crunchy treats.

Gnatdamp serves another, less visible market in addition to the merchandise the swamp provides, and it's this secondary trade that draws a specific clientele to the community. Due to its isolation and natural proclivity for minding its own business, Gnatdamp is the perfect location for conducting illegal deals and private negotiations amongst the denizens of the criminal underworld and political arena. Smugglers choose Gnatdamp as a meeting place, bringing outlawed or highly-taxed goods into the region through the myriad backwaters of the Murkmire. Here, they rendezvous with clients aboard ships moored in the harbor or in the curtained booths of the Painted Frog Inn, while stashing their goods in Gnatdamp's

warehouses and bribing the storehouse keepers to doubly ensure the natives' usual closed-mouths. The envoys of noble houses, hired killers, spies, and blackmailers make Gnatdamp their place of business when secrecy is desired to negotiate contracts or accept payment for services rendered.

The bearing of arms is allowed in Gnatdamp, but dryboots are informed that justice is swift in Gnatdamp and wanton violence is punishable by death. Gnatdampers themselves go armed with daggers, axes, spears, and clubs, but these are tools of their trade rather than battle arms. Only Gnatdamp's enforcers carry swords, but these are the implements of their trade as well.

Gnatdamp is free from most monstrous threats inherent to the Murkmire, but small hazards routinely plague village life. Thanks to old alliances, Gnatdamp has little to fear from the lizard- and froggish-folk. These scaly neighbors are free to trade in Gnatdamp, but they rarely stay long after business is completed. Venomous snakes are a fact of life and every Gnatdamper knows to check his woodpile carefully when brining in fuel. Giant river rats swim onto the banks to scavenge. Alligators are seldom seen and hunted when spotted, but during mating season, at least one bull alligator gets too close to someone's home for comfort. Leeches can be either giant or small in size, and a disease-carrying variety lurks in the pools around the village.

Defenses

Despite their lack of finery and close-lipped nature, the residents of Gnatdamp are neither simple nor foolish and know their continued existence depends on maintaining good relations with the surrounding sentient races of the swamp. Since its founding, Gnatdamp has endeavored to cultivate treaties of non-aggression with the lizard-folk whose tribal lands lie northwest of the village and the froggish people that occupy lands to the south-southwest. These treaties state that the residents of Gnatdamp will not trespass or violate the lands held by these tribes, limiting their hunting, fishing and foraging to neutral ground directly west of the settlement. More importantly, Gnatdampers avoid the great burial mounds where these races inter their dead. Any outsider arriving in Gnatdamp with plans to raid these sacred piles of earth and freshwater mollusk shells that rise from the stagnant swamp waters are quickly (and if necessary, forcibly) persuaded to depart Gnatdamp, leaving the burial mounds unmolested. Treasure-hunters who return from the Murkmire with ill-gotten gains dug from the burial mounds simply go missing. It is suspected that the Gnatdampers quietly capture and turn the looters over to the amphibious tribes for punishment, demonstrating their willingness to honor the old accords with the swamp clans.

Although Gnatdamp is unwalled, a natural



barrier surrounds the village on its landward side. The swampy terrain makes assault from that direction unlikely by forces unaccustomed to the marsh's hazards. Troops seeking to lay siege through the swamp would drown in near-bottomless fens, succumb to reptilian predators, die from the poisonous bite of snakes, or simply lose their way in the confusing network of bayous and animal paths that serve as roadways in the Murkmire. Indigenous races are not immune from the swamp's perils either. Large expanses of quicksand ring the village, making passage through them impossible for even amphibious creatures. These traps are bolstered by numerous spiked pits and deadfalls erected and maintained by the Gnatdampers. The residents are also on good terms with a human druid known locally as the Swamp Priest. The Swamp Priest (6th level druid) keeps the residents of Gnatdamp apprised of any developments amongst the marsh's native people that might indicate a prelude to war.

Supplementing the swamp barrier are a dozen watchtowers, crude wood and wicker affairs erected on 20-foot-tall posts that ring the village in a semi-circle. From these vantage points, Gnatdampers can spy attackers attempting to approach the village from outside the marsh. These towers are routinely manned by the villagers. Every able-bodied man and woman must spend two shifts each month serving on "Murkwatch," occupying a watchtower and keeping vigil. Shifts of service are determined by monthly lottery, and failure to serve or neglecting one's post is a fineable offense.

Should attackers manage to overcome the swamp and the watchtowers, a third threat remains before them: the Gnatdampers themselves. Many of the villagers are accomplished warriors and a few are knowledgeable in magic. A small number of the villagers have an enchanted blade or still-potent wand hidden away in the rafters of their homes. Gnatdamp may lack an official militia outside of the enforcers, but the populace, if stirred to arms, would assemble into a puissant martial force, one well-versed in any manner of battle tactics, including stealth and guerilla warfare. In the face of superior numbers, the Gnatdampers would disappear into the marsh to begin a protracted skirmish campaign against their opponents, utilizing their knowledge of the area to their best advantage.

Government, law, and order in Gnatdamp

The main authority figure in the village holds the position of Marsh-Hand, an office that combines the roles of mayor and magistrate. The current Marsh-Hand is Phaid Torngrasp (5th level fighter), an eight-year resident of Gnatdamp currently serving his third year in office.

The Marsh-Hand is advised by an ad-hoc

committee comprised of Gnatdamp's most respected and/or longest-residing citizens. This committee has no formal title or scheduled meetings and, instead, visit the Marsh-Hand on an individual basis whenever concerns weigh heavy on their minds. Although Gnatdamp's size prevents the Marsh-Hand from ever being above the reach of the masses, he cannot be everywhere at all times, and irregular meetings with well-regarded members of the community allows him to gauge the attitudes of the village and address their wants and needs, thereby ensuring his retainment of popular support.

Aside from the Marsh-Hand, there is but one other formal civic position in the village: the Sentinel. The Sentinel serves as the village sheriff and captain of the watch, and is responsible for maintaining law and order within Gnatdamp's boundaries. The Sentinel is served by a body of ten able-bodied men and women who bear the title of enforcer. Enforcers are handpicked by the Sentinel, who, like the Marsh-Hand, depend on public opinion for their title. This prevents him from turning the enforcers into a private brute squad. Nevertheless, a wise Sentinel knows that violence has its place in enforcing the peace and typically chooses bruisers that he can depend on to fill the roster of enforcers.

The laws of Gnatdamp are simple and straightforward, as are the punishments for breaking them. While a blind eye is turned to most minor infractions (and to major ones provided they only involve dryboots), any activities that threaten the overall peace or long-term survival of the community are punished quickly and directly. Violators are marched immediately to the Marsh-Hand, who passes judgment and decrees punishment if the accused is deemed guilty. Sentences are immediately carried out. Incarceration and prolonged trials are not feasible in the hard-knock daily life of Gnatdamp.

Dryboots are at a distinct disadvantage when running afoul of local laws. In Gnatdamp, where community solidarity is imperative to survival and political positions are retained by public support, the Marsh-Hand is more likely to side with the populace over dryboots stirring up trouble. Unless the dryboots on trial has earned a modicum of respect or renown in the community, he can expect the Marsh-Hand to rule against him when judgment is rendered, regardless of whether the accused is guilty or not. Well aware of this custom, many river-boat captains request for newcomers traveling upriver to remain onboard the ship when laying over at Gnatdamp—especially if passengers are brazen adventuring-types known for starting trouble in taverns.

Gnatdamp locations

A number of Gnatdamp's locations are detailed below, but many buildings on the vil-

lage map are left unkeyed. The game master can either treat these as private homes with little interest to visitors, or allocate to them functions or inhabitants of his own devising. The author suggests the latter.

1) Gnatdamp Harbor: A grandiose title for what is little more than a muddy riverbank ringed by wooden quays, Gnatdamp Harbor was once deep enough for the largest of river boats to moor in. Over the last few decades, however, silt passing around the river's bend has accumulated on the harbor's bottom, preventing larger ships from docking. Lacking the means to dredge the harbor, Gnatdamp has erected pilings at intervals throughout the harbor. Larger boats now tie up to these mooring posts and convey cargo and passengers ashore by jollyboat. Although the harbor can be a busy place, it rarely becomes crowded with vessels and docking is seldom a problem. Docking fees range from 1 sp a day for small skiff to 5 sp per ten feet of boat length for larger vessels mooring at pilings.

2) The Painted Frog inn: This three-story building serves visitors to Gnatdamp, providing rooms and meals at low prices. The business gets its name from the crudely carved statue of a squatting frog painted in motley colors, which sits in a niche adjacent to the front door. Accommodations at the inn range from 5 cp for a night in the common room to 1 gp per evening in a private room on the inn's third floor. Meals are separate and range from 2 cp for a bowl of lumpy porridge to 1 gp for the inn's famous mushroom-stuffed eel, served on a bed of wild rice. Drinks run from 1 cp to 2 gp, depending on quality and serving size.

The Painted Frog's proprietor is Verfred Oot (3rd level fighter), a former press-gang boss. Oot is knowledgeable in soporific drugs and still keeps a vial of "knock-out drops" on a high shelf in the inn's kitchen. He's not averse to using them, known to dose an unruly patron's meal or drink to end violence or avoid anticipated unruly behavior. Oot oversees a staff of five who act as chambermaids and servers. An old ship's bell hangs from the roof of the inn and can be rung from the building's main serving counter to quickly summon the guard from across the street should their presence be required at the Painted Frog.

3) Mother's boarding house: Transient laborers and Gnatdampers lacking the funds or inclination to build permanent homes dwell in this hulking, three-story brick building. "Mother" is actually Borgul Ramshead (4th level fighter), a towering monster of a man who once earned a living as a slaver and is well-versed in packing many bodies in small quarters. His staff of three workers keeps the boarding house's tiny rooms tolerable, but far from clean. For 5 sp a week, renters receive a cot, a dirty (and often damp) blanket, a splin-

tering footlocker, ewer, and basin. Two meals a day of barely-nutritional gruel and hard bread are included. “Mother” does not rent to adventurers, directing them to either the Painted Frog or a muddy patch under Gnatdamp’s boardwalks, depending on if he’s in a good mood or not.

4) Enforcers’ post: This squat brick building serves as base of operations for Gnatdamp’s ten enforcers. One is always on duty within, manning the building while another one to two guardsmen make rounds around the village. Gnatdamp’s enforcers each dress in ring mail and carry cudgels, short swords, and a set of manacles when performing their offices. The post houses a sparse armory containing two sets of spare ring mail, a number of cudgels, and four short swords. A small cell at the back of the post is used when arrested individuals need securing until they’re presented to the Marsh-Hand for judgment, but the swift legal process in Gnatdamp assures this jail is usually unoccupied. An iron gong hangs in front of the post; striking it repeatedly summons all the village’s enforcers to the post, armed and ready for action.

5) Alligator pit: A water-filled, muddy pit surrounded by a four-foot-high wooden fence lies here. Measuring 30-feet wide and 20-feet across, the pit is home to four alligators kept by the Gnatdampers as curiosities and executioners. The primeval reptiles are all females measuring 11 feet in length. Twice a day, Gerum o’ the Spike (4th level fighter), one of Gnatdamp’s enforcers, feeds the beasts hunks of meat from the metal hook that replaced his lost left hand. Visitors can observe the feedings for 1 sp. When a law-breaker is sentenced to death by pit, a plank is extended over the pit and the sentence is carried out by forcing the guilty party down its length and into the pit at spear-point. One legendary law-breaker, Dereg Itil, escaped his execution by using the plank as a springboard to leap over the pit and flee into the swamp, where he is still believed to be at large. Since that day, shorter boards are used in executions.

6) Boatwright: The interior of this cavernous building smells of sawdust and pitch. A crew of three workers overseen by Boatwright Rileah Blackfingers is found here building or repairing between six and eight skiffs or rafts on any given day. A large open pit occupies a portion of the building’s interior floor, where a series of block and tackle overhead lowers finished products down to the water beneath the building. For larger jobs, the muddy riverbank directly west of the business serves as Blackfinger’s dry-dock and careening yard. Rileah mostly repairs larger river boats and seldom constructs new ones, as there is no market for them in Gnatdamp, but he does accept commissions if a customer desires one. Rileah

was once chief boatwright for a kingdom’s navy, but the scandalous sinking of his regent’s flagship forced him from his position and onto the road. He ultimately settled in Gnatdamp where he resumed his trade.

7) Swamp rat provisions: This cluttered building serves as Gnatdamp’s general store. Ordinary items from nails to gator jerky to arrows are available for sale. The store’s proprietor, Dandal the Shaver (2nd level thief) is a shrewd negotiator who enjoys the art of haggling. No item is priced for sale, forcing clientele to inquire about the cost of desired supplies. Customers looking to make purchases here should prepare for an extended bargaining session before their business is concluded. Dandal does not carry weapons per se, but a small selection of knives and wood-axes, as well as quarrels and arrows, is available for purchase. A small outbuilding (7a), protected by three stout locks, serves as the store’s warehouse for items Dandal simply cannot fit in the already-crowded shelves and aisles.

8) The Bloated Leech tavern: A placard depicting a tremendous, swollen leech wrapped around an empty bottle hangs over the door of this low-roofed building. The interior of the building is largely an open space crowded with tables, benches, and chairs arranged before a smoking fire. The air inside the tavern is nearly as miasmic as that of the swamp outside and illumination is poor. A number of rough planks resting atop barrels serve as the establishment’s bar.

The Bloated Leech is operated by Adlaba Kurn, a woman in her early 40s whose zaftig figure and potent potables makes her popular amongst Gnatdampers and dryboots alike. Her eldest son, Gerly (2nd level fighter) serves as bouncer. Adlaba’s specialty is “bog water,” a fiery liquor fermented from swamp-grown tubers. Each bottle of bog water comes with a dead leech floating at the bottom to add flavor and color. Swallowing the leech is said to bring good fortune to drinkers. Drinks range in price from 1 cp for “dreg beer” (the remains of other drinks poured into a keg at the end of each night) to 2 gp for a bottle of bog water.

9) Punishment post: An eight-foot-tall tree trunk stands in the center of this earthen plaza, its exterior denuded of bark and marred by bloodstains and gouges. Criminals are chained to the post when corporal punishment is administered. The plaza also doubles as “village green” when floggings are not scheduled. After dark, this area is avoided for fear that the spirits of those who met their deaths at the post still linger, eager for revenge.

10) Warehouses: Each of these wooden structures is a large, two-story barn-like building capable of housing large quantities of goods, but seldom filled to capacity. Traders

on the river rent space inside the warehouses as needed, storing crates, barrels, bags, and other containers awaiting pick-up or delivery to their clients up and down the Ahkyl. Most of the goods housed here are common ones; anything of value is typically kept aboard ship. Each warehouse is watched by a single keeper armed with a lantern and cudgel. Low pay and boredom amongst the watchers makes them susceptible to bribes, a fact regularly taken advantage of by smugglers needing a place to stash illicit goods while awaiting their client’s arrival in Gnatdamp.

11) Closed bordello: This once lively, two-storied building is now shuttered, its green door fastened tight by chains and padlocks. The steel post that juts out above the door and once held the business’ placard rusts in the damp marsh air. Inside, the rooms that formerly housed shabby finery are stripped clean and left to decay. Although closed by decree in the past year, the bordello remains the property of “Lady” Viviana, its former madam. Viviana’s fortunes have increased considerably since the *Water Lily* took to the river and it is unlikely she would re-open the bordello even if the ban is lifted. She is willing to sell the property to interested buyers. An adventuring band looking for a long-term base of operations in Gnatdamp could do much worse than make Lady Viviana an offer on the building.

12) Fish house: This business is operated by Schall the Honest, a balding human male plagued by psoriasis and bulging eyes. He buys their catches daily, offering the hauls for sale to both village residents and river merchants. As a result, his shop is constantly busy. The rear of his store is dedicated to salting, smoking, and packing fish for sale at distant markets. This aspect of the business is handled by four apprentices – young men and women who arrived in Gnatdamp specifically seeking the fishmonger. A rumor exists that Schall was previously a sea priest and his apprentices are novices of the faith, who have come to learn the esoteric secrets of their religion under the tutelage of one of the church’s most renowned clergy. It is widely known that Schall pays good coin for exotic seafood such as giant crayfish, massive swamp eels, and giant crabs. Adventurers who defeat such threats during their exploits can make a tidy sum delivering the fresh carcasses of their kills to the fishmonger.

13) “Meat & Skins”: The plain wooden sign over the door to this single-story building proclaims its business. Sorga and Etienne, a married couple, are Gnatdamp’s butcher and tanner. Sorga handles the butchery and Etienne preserves hides for sale. The back of the store serves as both the establishment’s smokehouse and stretching room for skins. Etienne’s work is serviceable, but not skilled. She

sidelines in small goods such as pouches, belts, and boots, but lacks the talent or motivation to craft larger leather goods. Most of the business' earnings come from the sale of unusual hides such as alligator, snake, and other swamp critters. These preserved skins fetch high prices at civilized markets and the couple does a brisk trade in them with river merchants.

14) "Sundries": Bunches of drying herbs and flowers hang under the eaves of this small building, next to a sign that simply reads "Sundries" in both the common and gnomish languages. Operated by Wilem Stonenose (6th level thief), the shop deals in dried herbs, pipe-weed, exotic fungi, and snake-oil medicines. Wilem supplements his income with curiosities purchased from adventurers and travelers, and with a remarkable amount of "under the counter" wares such as narcotics, poisons, thieves' tools, and magical components of an illicit nature. This secondary business is the worst kept secret in Gnatdamp, and any adventurer casually mentioning they're in the market for such wares are directed to Wilem's shop. As befitting a thief with access to numerous toxins, Wilem not only carries a number of venomous blades on his person, but protects his wealth with complex poisonous traps. Wilem never admits to being trained in the larcenous arts and does not respond to anyone using the Thieves Cant, feigning ignorance. He has come a long way to hide from his former guild and has no desire to be rediscovered.

15) Dorota of Charms: This small house is home to Dorota (6th level magic user/4th

level druid), a seemingly human female in her late twenties. Despite her appearance, fae blood flows strongly in her veins and she is much older than she appears. Dorota is Gnatdamp's resident witch, wise woman, and—since the closing of the temple—healer. Her home lies a distance from the village proper, causing newcomers to believe she's ostracized and feared by the Gnatdampers. In fact, Dorota is extremely respected in the village and dwells on the outskirts only to be closer to the natural beauty she sees in the surrounding swamplands. She trades in the philters, charms, and love potions expected from her, most of which are nothing more than effective placebos. When sickness strikes the village, Dorota can be seen travelling swiftly to the homes of the afflicted, her large satchel of herbs and medicines slung over one shoulder. She has an excellent record of recovered patients, having seen several through normally fatal swamp-borne illnesses, such as "the dry shakes," "black lip," and "scum ague." Her fees for healing are extremely small; what she charges for charms and philters more than compensates for her meager rewards for medical treatment. Dorota also acts as the village's intermediary with the Swamp Priest, but the two are not of the same Circle and their relationship is chilly at best.

16) Shuttered temple: Five years ago, a young flamebrand of a cleric arrived in Gnatdamp to spread the word of the Sovereign God and redeem the outlaw community. Sermoner Peryl (5th level cleric) converted a ramshackle and disused storehouse into the village's sole

temple and embarked on an aggressive campaign of conversion. To his dismay, he discovered the residents of Gnatdamp were ill-suited to the strict demands of his faith and he gained few converts. Never one to be dissuaded when preaching the True Word, Sermoner Peryl stepped up his efforts, threatening Gnatdampers with an array of freezing afterlives awaiting them if they died unredeemed. His aggressive preaching grated on the nerves of the majority of the Gnatdampers, who took their complaints to the Marsh-Hand. The civic leader responded by banning the public practice of religion in the village, effectively closing the fane for good. Sermoner Peryl is now a traveling evangelist, sailing up and down the Ahkyl on a small boat given to him by his tiny Gnatdamp congregation. He returns to the village once every two weeks to conduct services in the homes of his adherents. His former church stands empty, its furnishing and symbols packed away in one of the Gnatdamp's warehouses until the day comes—for which Sermoner Peryl prays constantly—when open religion is once again allowed in the village.

17) "Arms & Iron": The village smithy is easily identifiable as it is the only stone building in the village. A sign depicting a sword crossed by a nail stands on an iron post in front of the business. Gnatdamp's smith is Effemi Nuha (9th level magic-user), a short woman with corded arm muscles and close-cropped hair. She toils tirelessly at her forge, fashioning the myriad small iron objects that daily life requires. When time allows, she smelts bog iron purchased from prospectors and forges



swords, spear- and arrowheads, and links for ring and chainmail. Her work is excellent, but the final products suffer from being crafted with low-grade ore. Effemi is regarded as the quietest woman in stoical Gnatdamp, grunting and shrugging when that suffices and speaking in monosyllables only when absolutely necessary.

Effemi was once an imperial wizard tasked with creating enchanted blades for nobility. It was in this capacity that she developed her impressive smithing and weapon-smithing skills. A courtly coup upset her position, and with political and magical rivals at her heels, she fled the capital and eventually settled in Gnatdamp. She guards her former identity fiercely, hiding any telltale sign that she commands magic. Her paranoia is severe enough that she is reluctant to speak for fear her voice is recognizable by those who knew her in better days. A simple iron ring worn on her right hand is enchanted against divination attempts of all types, protecting Effemi from magical detection and scrying. It would take extreme circumstances for Effemi to drop her guise as simple blacksmith and throw spells. Only an event such as an attack on the village by overwhelming forces might convince her to reveal her secret. Dorota knows of her magical talents, but Effemi is unaware of this. Thankfully for her, Dorota is as unlikely to reveal Effemi's true identity as the "smith" is.

18) Marsh-Hand Phaid's residence: Gnatdamp has no central "village hall" where civic authority holds court. With its informal method of government, the village center is simply the home of whoever currently serves as Marsh-Hand. At the moment, that is the home of Phaid Torngasp. The Marsh-Hand dwells in this two-story building, performing his duties and hosting meetings with residents on the ground floor, and resides in his chambers above. There is a 75% chance that he is at home attending to community matters during the daylight hours; otherwise he is out walking the village, talking with his constituents, or dining at the Painted Frog inn. He is almost always home in the evenings, but tends to sleep early. Gnatdampers know not to disturb him after sunset unless matters are imperative.

Marsh-Hand Phaid is a human male in his late 30s. His surname derives from the missing pinky and index fingers on his right hand, victims to a sword fight in his youth—or so he claims. Some dryboots have commented that those same fingers are commonly cut off the hands of thieves in other lands, but, as is Gnatdamp's wont, no one has pressed Phaid on the matter. Another rumor has recently made the rounds regarding the civic leader, however. In the wake of his closing of Gnatdamp's temple and bordello, some merchants have speculated that Phaid may have once been more than a simple soldier. These wagging tongues whisper that Phaid is in truth a fallen

paladin, his divine power stripped of him when he succumbed to sin. Closing the bawdy house and temple to another god might be signs that Marsh-Hand Phaid is seeking to atone for his past sins and gain redemption in the eyes of his deity. The truth of this rumor is left for the game master to decide.

19) Kalo the Mad's home: A single-story, poorly constructed house resides at this location, its ill-maintained appearance notable even in a community rife with shoddy housekeeping. This is the home of Kalo Xyln, commonly known as Kalo the Mad. Kalo is a pitiful case. He is missing both legs from the knee down and makes his way about the village on a pair of short crutches. Kalo drinks as regularly as he can manage, depending on the charity of others. When sober, he mutters continuously and is startled by his own shadow. Episodes of sheer terror occasionally grip him, during which he goes into a fetal position and sobs painfully. Unable to work, Kalo begs scraps from the Painted Frog's kitchen, the Fish House, Meat & Skins, and from private homes.

Kalo was once sane and a skilled hunter.

Unfortunately, he was captured by a renegade band of lizard-folk, exiles from their tribe who cared little for their race's treaty with Gnatdamp. The outlaw lizard-folk tortured Kalo for entertainment, and when that grew tiresome, decided to eat him alive over several days. The lizardmen ate off his legs and were prepared to continue their feast when the Swamp Priest came upon their camp. The druid killed or chased off the renegades and returned Kalo to Gnatdamp. Although his body survived the ordeal, Kalo's mind did not. He's been a pitiful wretch ever since.

Although he is fearful to speak of it, Kalo believes he is haunted, but not by any normal spirit. Late at night, he swears he hears the sound of footsteps squishing through the mud outside his window and pacing steadily before his door. Kalo is convinced these noises are made by his devoured legs coming back to collect the rest of him, to be reunited in death, and will not venture outside his door after dark for any reason. Kalo has shared his belief with a very select few of his fellow Gnatdampers, but they dismiss his notion as yet another manifestation of his madness. ■

Adventure Seeds

Presented below are four brief suggestions for adventures occurring within or leading to Gnatdamp. The game master can elaborate, integrate, or derive inspiration from these adventure seeds, customizing them for use in any campaign.

1) The PCs are hired to locate a wanted individual and return him for trial or punishment. The sought-after subject might be wanted by the city watch, the thieves' guild, his former master, or some other party with something to gain should the subject be brought back alive. Clues indicate that the hunted individual is now a resident of Gnatdamp. The PCs must make the journey to the village (avoiding any hazards of travel), locate the individual (who might be unrecognizable in his new community), and detain and return him to their masters. This will not be an easy task, as Gnatdampers are reluctant to talk about their fellows to dryboots and would rally together to prevent the capture of one of their own.

2) The party is drawn to Gnatdamp by legends of great riches in the swamps west of the village. These tales speak of golden ornaments interred with the bodies of lizard-folk chieftains in their sacred burial mounds and Cyclopean ruins of ancient civilizations (perhaps the forgotten empire of the lizard-folks' more enlightened ancestors?) half-submerged in the murky waters of the swamp. Pursuing these legends will take them into the lizard-folk's tribal lands and, if discovered there, could shatter the fragile treaties that keep Gnatdamp protected from the scaly tribes. The PCs could easily spark a war in the swamps, one they'll find themselves in the center of!

3) While drinking bog water at the Bloated Leech, a visiting dryboot clutches his throat and dies from asphyxiation. The culprit: a deadly choke leech somehow still alive in the liquor bottle. While Gnatdampers are likely to dismiss the cause of death as an unlucky accident, it is later revealed that the dead man was in Gnatdamp on secret royal business. Was his death the work of an assassin using the bog water's unique garnish to mask his crime? Adlaba Kurn, the tavern's proprietor, wants the truth discovered, if only to clear her famous liquor of scandal's taint.

4) One of the village enforcers swears she saw a bizarre sight while making her rounds: a pair of ghostly legs, visible from the knees down, walking slowly down the boardwalk. The mysterious, abbreviated limbs vanished into the gloom and mist, leaving her puzzled and unsettled by what they could be. Might Kalo be right about his strange haunting or is there another explanation behind the ghostly legs that walk the night?

The new warrens

by Wolfgang Baur

Welcome to the latest refuge of the Kobold Press crew! Yep, kobolds are tough to kill off – they pop up where they aren't necessarily expected and, *boom*, here we are.

So what is the *Kobold's Cavern*, and what should you expect from this section of the magazine? Mostly, it's a place to deliver news in a smaller and more convenient size. The articles presented in this issue are ones that I had planned to publish in the winter issue of the late *Kobold Quarterly* magazine, and were too good to pass away into darkness!

What do you get here, exactly? Well, we're starting with the basics: Loot and Combat. The treasures include a Magical Miscellany and a Great Inventions article for *Dragon Age RPG*, and the combat comes in the form of a smart and highly playable bit of martial content for *Pathfinder RPG*, namely Scaling Combat Feats. This system of feat substitution is the sort of house rule that I'd love to see made official in future *Pathfinder RPG* rules. There's hints of it already in the *Mythic Adventures* playtest.

So, in future issues, expect the *Kobold's Cavern* to bring you additional material for *Pathfinder RPG*, *Dragon Age RPG*, *13th Age*, as well as the new *Midgard* campaign setting. The kobolds are fans of traditional *D&D* game-play in all its many forms, and I look forward to providing nothing but the best spells, monsters, adventures, and classes for your fantasy gaming, no matter what system you prefer.

Onward!

Wolfgang Baur
Publisher, Kobold Press



the Kobold's Cavern

Magical Miscellany

by Randall Hurlburt

Magic items are a mainstay of fantasy role-playing games. Players' eyes light up when a game master (GM) describes a potent new item amongst a dragon's treasure hoard, be it a glowing sword or a jeweled ring that radiates magical energy. The following are a variety of magical items for any *AGE* system fantasy role-playing campaign. These items have approximately the same power as those items found in Set 1 and Set 2 of the *AGE* system rules. GMs will have to decide which are appropriate for the power levels of their own campaigns.

Armor of Autumn: This elven, light leather armor has oak leaves carved into it and dyed red, orange, and yellow. It was created by an elven cult that believed that the decline of the elves should be embraced rather than fought. Mages who wear this armor can ignore strain when casting *Entropy* spells, and also gain a +1 to their spell power when casting these spells.

Masterwork Benefits: Armor Bonus +1

Cap of the Gambler is a broad-brimmed black hat trimmed with silver and gold embroidery. A wizard with a dark sense of humor

made it for a gambler who wanted to make a big score the easy way. The gambler won a fortune in a card game, but on the way home he was killed when he fell off his horse. Once per day, the wearer of this cap can take a +2 bonus on one ability test. However, once they use the bonus, they receive a -2 penalty on the next ability test they are required to make.

Cloak of the Wolf is a heavy cloak of fur made from the pelt of a werewolf killed by a crusading wizard. Normal wolves will not attack anyone wearing the cloak, and it grants the wearer a +2 to Communication (Animal Handling) tests when dealing with such animals.

Heretic Collar: This heavy collar was created by those who hunt down rogue wizards and apostates. It is made from solid iron, strengthened by magic to be nearly unbreakable. The collar suppresses the magical talents of those whose neck it is placed around. Any spells that the collar wearer casts cost an additional 4 mp and the target number to cast any spell is increased by 2. In addition, the wearer does not regain mana points by normal means.

Giantbane: This oversized, two-handed maul has a massive steel head. The wooden haft is reinforced by steel bands, making the weapon so heavy the wielder must have a minimum strength of 1 higher than normal. It was created by dwarves to be wielded by their heroes in their mountain wars against the giants. The last bearer of the maul disappeared under a horde of enemies, and it is believed that looters made off with it after the battle. Against giants and giant-like foes, such as ogres and trolls, the maul does an additional 2 points of damage. This bonus is in addition to the masterwork benefit.

Masterwork Benefits:

Attack Bonus +0, Damage Bonus +2

Superior Benefits:

Talent Level Bonus: One level

Heart of Friendship: A peace-loving duke once commissioned this amulet from his court mage. It was to be worn by his emissary when visiting and negotiating with other more aggressive nobles. The heart of friendship is a large heart-shaped garnet set in gold on a gold chain. The wearer of the heart gains a +1 bonus on all Communication (Diplomacy and Persuasion) tests.

Heartseeker arrows are rare and powerful magic arrows much sought after by assassins. The shafts are blackened ash and the feathers are from black swans. The arrowheads of blackened steel break off after they strike a target and begin working their way towards the heart. Each round after being struck, the victim must make a TN 11 Constitution (Stamina) test at the beginning of his or her turn, or take 1d6-2 (minimum 1) damage. The victim must continue making this test until the arrowhead is removed. Removing it requires a TN 11 advanced test using cunning (healing), with a success threshold of 10. These arrows only lose their enchantment after striking a target.

Masterwork Benefits:

Attack Bonus +1, Damage Bonus +0

Plate of the Commander: Several suits of this heavy plate armor were made and given to the commanders of an order of knights whose quest was to destroy a cabal of evil sorcerers. The knights were successful but, years later, weakened by corruption within their ranks, they fell to a group of mages following in the footsteps of that original cabal. Most of these armor were destroyed, while a few were taken. They can occasionally be found in the treasure troves of liches and mummies. This armor gives the wearer a +1 bonus on rolls to resist spells.

Masterwork Benefits:

Communication (Leadership) +1

Superior Benefits:

Armor Penalty +1

Potion of Borrowed Power is a foul-tasting concoction, this magical elixir gives mages a boost to the power of their spells, but at a price. Drinking it gives +1 bonus to the power of any spell cast for 10 minutes. However, after the potion wears off, the mage has a penalty of -2 to spell power for 10 minutes.

Rapier's Wit is a magical rapier created at the request of a young nobleman who found that, although he was a skilled swordsman, he lacked the social skills others of his station commanded. He could not keep up with conversations, did not understand when someone was being sarcastic, and had no idea who was doing what to whom. He tired of being treated like a fool by his peers, and sought a way to improve his chances in social combat. When someone carries this rapier, even in a scabbard on their belt, they receive a +1 bonus to all Communication (Deception, Etiquette, and Persuasion) tests.

Masterwork Benefits:

Attack Bonus +1, Damage Bonus +1

Razmuth's Wand: Razmuth, a mage, took great pleasure in challenging other arcanists to magical duels. He fought for the joy of it and for the opportunity to prove his superiority over others. He created this wand from lightning-struck oak to give him an additional edge over his opponents. When used, it gives the wielder a +2 bonus to damage that is done with the spell lance class ability, and a +1 bonus to spell power when casting *Primal* spells.

Shield of Stability: A mercenary warlord who wanted an army of unstoppable foot soldiers contracted a guild of wizard-smiths to make these magical shields. Only a few were ever finished, as the mercenary ran out of money before he could pay, and the wizard-smiths went to work for the opposition. A bearer of one of these heavy steel shields is very difficult to move. When using the Stand Firm action, the bearer gets a +2 bonus on his or her Strength (Might) tests to resist the skirmish or knock prone stunts. There is no bonus if the bearer uses Dexterity (Acrobatics) to resist these stunts.

Spell ring: Only a few of these plain gold bands still exist. They were created for mages concerned with running out of magical power, who wanted to have a little magic in reserve to use as a last resort. A mage can store one spell in the ring. To do this the mage must cast the spell to be stored onto the ring and pay double the normal cost in mana points. For spells with a variable mana point cost, the mage must decide how many points to spend when storing the spell. The ring then holds the spell until it is discharged. To use the spell in the ring requires a major action, but the mage need only spend 1 mana point. All other rules for

casting the spell apply as normal.

Steelbreaker: This ancient longsword was magically enhanced to be more effective against armor made from iron or steel, such as mail or plate. When used to strike someone wearing such armor, the damage is piercing. If the wielder uses the Pierce Armor stunt, the damage becomes penetrating. It offers no benefit against armor made from other materials, such as leather or other metal alloys.

Masterwork Benefits:

Attack Bonus +1, Damage Bonus +0

Superior Benefits: Minimum Strength -1

Trickster's Gloves are favored by stage magicians as well as pickpockets. These supple, tight-fitting leather gloves improve the wearer's sleight of hand skills. Wearing them grants a +2 bonus to Dexterity (Legerdemain) tests.

Vigilant Cloak: Spies and agents are always looking over their shoulder, expecting a knife in the back at any moment. Eventually, one of them got tired of always being so vigilant and paid a mage to create this cloak (and then killed the mage). It protects the wearer from being attacked without warning, especially from behind. The wearer of the cloak gets a +2 bonus to defense against a rogue's backstab ability, and 3 points of armor rating if struck by a backstab attack. ■



An AGE of great inventions

by Rodrigo García Carmona

A famous sage once said: “any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” (Arthur C. Clarke) That’s precisely the goal most engineers aim to reach, constantly striving to replicate the effects of magic spells, but without the primitive superstitions and chants usually attached. Believing that magic is just “phenomena not yet understood” (Elbert Hubbard), they show utter disdain for mystics, seeing them as misguided fools. Engineers hold the ultimate truth of the universe: everything, from the dawn of existence to the end of times, will be explained by the unrelenting hammer of science. Eventually.

This article introduces the Inventor talent to the *Adventure Game Engine* system (*AGE*), allowing characters to pursue a more scientific view of the world. Inventors research, reverse-engineer and devise wondrous contraptions that (when working properly) can turn the tide of battles or even embarrass powerful sorcerers. However, malfunctions are not as uncommon as inventors claim, putting the life of users at considerable risk. Being an inventor is a dangerous path, but progress demands sacrifices!

New focus: Cunning (Engineering)

Engineering is the art of solving problems . . . it is also about producing amazing objects with limited resources. Engineers possess some knowledge of math, physics, alchemy, biology, and astronomy, but are focused on designing and building physical objects. For them, natural sciences are just means to an end.

New talent: Invention

Classes: Mage, Rogue, and Warrior.

Requirement: You must have the Cunning (Engineering) focus. Inventors are men and women of insight, curiosity, and iron will. They venture into the unknown to find answers to mankind’s Big Questions, such as “How much explosive would be needed to destroy that castle’s wall?” or “Are heavier-than-air flying machines possible?”

Although most inventors tend to be Rogues or Warriors, Mages who decide to follow the path of science are not unheard of. After all, it’s simply another branch of knowledge. They don’t share the other inventors’ disregard for magic, though.

Novice: You have begun your foray into the realms of science, and are able to follow instructions left by others. Choose two magic spells; you know how to make gadgets that replicate their effect. You own the corresponding blueprints and understand them. You can learn how to make other gadgets if you find and understand the corresponding blueprints.

Journeyman: Building other people’s designs has taught you the secrets of making reliable and efficient machines. In fact, you think you are capable of improving existing designs. You are able to research an existing blueprint to diminish the chance of malfunction or reduce the manufacturing costs. You can also reverse-engineer a blueprint from a sample of an existing gadget.

Master: Now you truly are an inventor deserving of the name: you have learned how to create innovative gadgets from scratch and are able to perform original research. You can produce completely new blueprints that replicate the effects of existing magic spells.

If magic can, technology can too

At the core of most inventors’ reason to push forward in their pursuits is the drive to demonstrate that, whatever magic does, technology can do too. Therefore, it is not strange that almost every contraption created by an inventor mimics the effect of a well-known magic spell. In game terms, a **gadget** is a **one-time use** object built by an inventor that replicates the effect of a magic spell.

Blueprints

To be able to build a gadget, a character needs to possess the aforementioned Invention talent and the corresponding **blueprint**. Blueprints are documents describing how to create

a particular gadget, and have the following characteristics:

Name: The name of the gadget described. Be creative!

Spell: The name of the magic spell the gadget replicates.

Target Number (TN): The TN to successfully build and/or use the gadget. For a non-improved blueprint, it’s the TN of the replicated spell +2.

Activation Time: The amount of time needed to use the gadget in combat. For a non-improved blueprint it’s the Casting Time of the replicated spell.

Cost: The amount of silver pieces needed to build a single instance of the gadget. For a non-improved blueprint, it’s the Mana Cost of the replicated spell multiplied by 10.

Build Time: The amount of time needed to build a single copy of the gadget. For a non-improved blueprint, it’s twice the Mana Cost of the replicated spell in hours.

For example, this is the blueprint of a gadget that replicates the effect of the Flame Blast spell, one of the more popular inventions:

Extreme-Impact Volatile Thermal Charge	
Spell	Flame Blast
Target Number	14
Activation Time	Major Action
Cost	30 sp
Build Time	6 hours

How the gadget is actually implemented is not mechanically important, and is left to the imagination of the players and the GM. We suggest extravagant names and technological-sounding descriptions that make the inventor proud of his creation. Some famous gadgets include the *Flesh Recombulator Engine* (which replicates the *Heal* spell) or the *Stasis Cryo-Force Amplifier* (which works as the *Glyph of Preservation* spell).

Obtaining new blueprints

Every character with the Inventor talent owns two blueprints, enabling the creation of a couple of useful items. However, it won't be long before even the most secluded engineer feels the desire for more and goes on travels searching for new and exciting blueprints. News of a mysterious blueprint could be excellent adventure hooks. As a GM, use them to their full potential.

Usage and malfunctions

Unfortunately, gadgets suffer malfunctions with alarming frequency. They require careful handling and tend to involve complex and precise activation sequences, composed of many convoluted steps. Because of this, only characters with the Invention talent can use a gadget. However, inventors do not need to own the blueprint of a specific gadget to use it.

To use a gadget a character must make a Cunning (Engineering) check. The TN of the check is what is specified in the blueprint of the gadget. If the check is successful, then everything has worked as expected: resolve the action as if the replicated spell would have been successfully cast. Use 10 + Cunning (Engineering) of the gadget's user as the Spellpower.

However, if the check fails, something horrible has happened. The gadget has malfunctioned and the effect of the spell is reversed:

- If the spell causes any damage or negative condition, or imposes a penalty to the target, the gadget's user will be the target instead. If the spell covers an area, it will be centered on the gadget's user. For instance, a gadget replicating the *Shock* spell that malfunctions will shock allies in a 36' x 36' area, centered on the gadget's user.
- If the spell causes any healing or positive condition, or grants a bonus to the target, the target will suffer the opposite effect instead. For instance, a gadget replicating the *Heal* spell that suffers a malfunction will cause 1-3d6 damage to the target; a gadget replicating the *Heroic Offense* spell will impose a -1 penalty to the target's Strength, and so on.

Either way, success or failure, the gadget used has been expended and cannot be recovered.

Building gadgets

Every character with the Invention talent can build a gadget, provided he has the appropriate blueprint. To do that he must spend the amount of money specified in the blueprint (for the raw materials) and work in an appropriate environment (like a laboratory) for the required number of hours. At the end of this process the GM will make a Cunning (Engineer) check using the stats of the inventor in secret. The TN of this check is what is indi-

cated in the blueprint.

If the check succeeds, the gadget has been properly built and will behave normally when used (although it is still susceptible to malfunctions).

If not, the gadget will do nothing . . . not even malfunction. But this is something that the character won't discover until he uses the gadget in the field. The wonderful creations of inventors never fail to increase adrenaline levels.

Improving a blueprint

Luckily, there are ways to mitigate this problem. A skilled inventor can improve an existing blueprint, alleviating the risks associated with its use and even reducing the manufacturing costs. The latter could seem superfluous, but the path of creation is an expensive one, and every bit helps.

A character with the Inventor talent at the Journeyman level can spend some time improving a blueprint he already owns. To improve a blueprint the inventor must spend twice the money required to produce a single copy of the gadget and work in an appropriate environment. The player can make an advanced Cunning (Engineering) check with the TN shown in the blueprint and a threshold of 15. Each check requires a day of study. When the task is complete the player will have improved the blueprint in one of the following two aspects:

Reliability: The gadgets produced by this blueprint are more reliable and easier to use. Decrease the TN of the blueprint by 2.

Cost: The gadgets produced by this blueprint are built using cheaper materials, reducing the manufacturing cost by half.

A blueprint cannot be improved more than once in any of these two dimensions. This means that a non-improved blueprint can see its reliability and cost improved one time each.

When improving a blueprint the player must roll on the next table each time he fails a check:

d6	Effect
1-3	Nothing happens
4-5	You suffer Xd3 penetrating damage, where X is the Mana cost of the replicated spell
6	You suffer Xd6 penetrating damage, where X is the Mana cost of the replicated spell

Reverse-engineering

Gadgets created by famous inventors are highly valued on the black market. This is because an experienced inventor can learn how to create copies of a gadget not only from a blueprint, but also after careful inspection of a working sample.

Characters with the Inventor talent at the Journeyman level can reverse-engineer a blueprint from an existing gadget. The inventor must spend five times the money required to produce a single copy of the gadget and work in an appropriate environment. The character can make an advanced Cunning (Engineer) check with a threshold of 20 and the TN required to use the gadget. Each check requires a day of study. When the task is complete he will have created a non-improved blueprint of the studied gadget.

When reverse-engineering a gadget the player must roll on the next table each time he fails a check:

d6	Effect
1-3	Nothing happens
4-5	You suffer Xd3 penetrating damage, where X is the Mana cost of the replicated spell
6	The sample gadget is destroyed, and the reverse-engineering fails.

Blueprint creation

Most blueprints in circulation are the makings of a couple of incredibly capable master inventors. These sought-after individuals have taken the scientific method to its logical end, and can create where others can only copy.

Creating an entirely new blueprint is a very difficult affair, and only a character with the Invention talent at the master level can attempt this process. First of all, he must choose the magic spell that he wants to replicate, and find a mage that can cast it at least once in his presence. After the inventor has seen the spell in action he must spend ten times the money required to produce a single copy of the gadget and work in an appropriate environment. The character can make an advanced Cunning (Engineer) check with a threshold of 25 and the TN required to use the gadget. Each check requires a day of study. When the task is complete he will have created a non-improved blueprint for the desired gadget.

When creating a new blueprint the player must roll on the next table each time he fails a check:

d6	Effect
1-3	Nothing happens
4-5	You suffer Xd3 penetrating damage, where X is the Mana cost of the replicated spell
6	The sample gadget is destroyed, and the reverse-engineering fails.

Scaling combat feats for *Pathfinder*

by Marc Radle

Feats.

They're cool, they're fun, and they're a great way to customize your character. Let's face it – you can never have enough feats!

Yet sometimes people avoid certain feats, or more accurately, groups of feats. They bristle at being required to take a feat, followed by the Improved version (and perhaps even the Greater version as well) just to get the full potential and benefit of that feat.

Scaling combat feats are presented as an alternative. Instead of the 'feat chain' model, scaling combat feats instead look to feats like *Power Attack* and *Deadly Aim* for inspiration. The result combines the various individual feats from a given feat chain to create a single, yet still balanced feat, which simply and elegantly scales up in power as the character does.

Implementing scaling combat feats in your game is simple. Each feat is presented exactly like any other feat, with the exception of one additional bit of information. Each feat includes a 'Replaces' line that details the feats from the *Pathfinder RPG* core rules, which should be removed in order to instead use a given scaling combat feat.

This modular approach means that GMs can opt to use all 12 scaling combat feats, or can pick and choose only the ones they want to include in their games.

When replacing feat chains from the core rules with the scaling combat feats detailed here, a few 'grey areas' might crop up. The GM will need to decide how to handle these grey areas should they arise.

Feats as prerequisites

Occasionally, one feat will list another as a prerequisite. If a given feat in your game requires as a prerequisite a feat that has been replaced with a scaling combat feat, the easiest solution is simply to use that scaling combat feat as the new prerequisite.

If necessary, however, the GM could also decide to use the minimum BAB requirement from the replaced feat as an additional prerequisite.

For example, if a feat normally requires *Great Cleave* as a prerequisite, the GM could instead change that feat's prerequisite to be *Cleave (Scaling)*, +4 BAB.

Feats and class features

Some classes include bonus feats in their class features. If a feat listed as a bonus feat has been replaced with a scaling combat feat, simply use the appropriate scaling combat feat in its place. If necessary, remove any subsequent feats from the replaced feat chain gained at later levels.

For example, if a ranger selects archery as his combat style, he can normally choose from the following list whenever he gains a combat style feat: *Far Shot*, *Point Blank Shot*, *Precise Shot*, and *Rapid Shot*. At 6th level, he adds *Improved Precise Shot* and *Manyshot* to the list. At 10th level, he adds *Pinpoint Targeting* and *Shot on the Run* to the list.

If scaling combat feats are being used, the ranger's list would instead look like this: *Far Shot*, *Point Blank Shot*, *Precise Shot (Scaling)*, and *Rapid Shot*. At 6th level, he adds *Manyshot* to the list. At 10th level, he adds *Pinpoint Targeting* and *Shot on the Run* to the list. (*Precise Shot [Scaling]* replaces *Precise Shot* from the core rules; *Improved Precise Shot* was removed from the list)

Other cases

The GM should use these guidelines when deciding any similar grey areas that might crop up in the game.

Cleave (Scaling, Combat)

You can strike adjacent foes with a single swing.

Replaces: *Cleave* (core rules), *Great Cleave*

Prerequisites: Str 13, *Power Attack*, base

attack bonus +1.

Benefit: As a standard action, you can make a single attack at your full base attack bonus against a foe within reach. If you hit, you deal damage normally and can make one additional attack (using your full base attack bonus) against one additional foe that is adjacent to the first and also within reach.

When your base attack bonus reaches +4, you can continue to make attacks against foes adjacent to the previous foe, so long as they are within your reach. You cannot attack an individual foe more than once during this attack action.

When you use this feat, you take a –2 penalty to your armor class until your next turn.

Improved Bull Rush (Scaling, Combat)

You are very skilled at pushing your foes around.

Replaces: *Improved Bull Rush* (core rules), *Greater Bull Rush*

Prerequisite: Str 13, *Power Attack*, base attack bonus +1.

Benefit: You do not provoke an attack of opportunity when performing a bull rush combat maneuver. In addition, you receive a +2 bonus on checks made to bull rush a foe. You also receive a +2 bonus to your Combat Maneuver Defense whenever an opponent tries to bull rush you.

When your base attack bonus reaches +6, your bonus on checks made to bull rush a foe increases to +4. In addition, whenever you bull rush an opponent, his movement now provokes attacks of opportunity from all of your allies (but not you).

Normal: You provoke an attack of opportunity when performing a bull rush combat maneuver. Creatures moved by bull rush do not provoke attacks of opportunity.

Improved Disarm (Scaling, Combat)

You are skilled at knocking weapons from a foe's grasp.

Replaces: *Improved Disarm* (core rules), *Greater Disarm*

Prerequisite: Int 13, *Combat Expertise*.

Benefit: You do not provoke an attack of opportunity when performing a disarm combat maneuver. In addition, you receive a +2 bonus on checks made to disarm a foe. You also receive a +2 bonus to your Combat Maneuver Defense whenever an opponent tries to disarm you.

When your base attack bonus reaches +6, the bonus increases to +4. Whenever you successfully disarm an opponent, the weapon lands 15 feet away from its previous wielder, in a random direction, instead of at the feet of the disarmed creature.

Normal: You provoke an attack of opportunity when performing a disarm combat maneuver. Disarmed weapons and gear land at the feet of the disarmed creature.

Improved Feint (Scaling, Combat)

You are skilled at fooling your opponents in combat.

Replaces: *Improved Feint* (core rules), *Greater Feint*

Prerequisites: Int 13, *Combat Expertise*.

Benefit: You can make a Bluff check to feint in combat as a move action.

When your base attack bonus reaches +6, using such a feint to cause an opponent to lose his Dexterity bonus causes him to lose that bonus until the beginning of your next turn, in addition to losing his Dexterity bonus against your next attack.

Normal: Feinting in combat is a standard action. A creature you feint loses its Dexterity bonus against your next attack.

Improved Grapple (Scaling, Combat)

You are skilled at grappling opponents.

Replaces: *Improved Grapple* (core rules), *Greater Grapple*

Prerequisite: Dex 13, *Improved Unarmed Strike*.

Benefit: You do not provoke an attack of opportunity when performing a grapple combat maneuver. In addition, you receive a +2 bonus on checks made to grapple a foe. You also receive a +2 bonus to your Combat Maneuver Defense whenever an opponent tries to grapple you.

When your base attack bonus reaches +6, the bonus on checks made to grapple a foe increases to +4. In addition, once you have grappled a creature, maintaining the grapple is a move action. You may make two grapple checks each round (to move, harm, or pin your opponent), but you are not required to make two checks. You only need to succeed at one of these checks to maintain the grapple.

Normal: You provoke an attack of opportunity when performing a grapple combat maneuver. Maintaining a grapple is a standard action.

Improved Overrun (Scaling, Combat)

You are skilled at running down your foes.

Replaces: *Improved Overrun* (core rules), *Greater Overrun*

Prerequisite: Str 13, *Power Attack*, base

attack bonus +1.
Benefit: You do not provoke an attack of opportunity when performing an overrun combat maneuver. In addition, you receive a +2 bonus on checks made to overrun a foe. You also receive a +2 bonus to your Combat Maneuver Defense whenever an opponent tries to overrun you. Targets of your overrun attempt may not choose to avoid you.

When your base attack bonus reaches +6, the bonus on checks made to overrun a foe increases to +4. In addition, whenever you overrun opponents, they now provoke attacks of opportunity if they are knocked prone by your overrun.

Normal: You provoke an attack of opportunity when performing an overrun combat maneuver. Creatures knocked prone by your overrun do not provoke an attack of opportunity.

Improved Sunder (Scaling, Combat)

You are skilled at damaging your foe's weapons, armor, and eventually even the wielder himself.

Replaces: *Improved Sunder* (core rules), *Greater Sunder*

Prerequisite: Str 13, *Power Attack*, base

attack bonus +1.
Benefit: You do not provoke an attack of opportunity when performing a sunder combat maneuver. In addition, you receive a +2 bonus on checks made to sunder an item. You also receive a +2 bonus to your Combat Maneuver Defense whenever an opponent tries to sunder your gear.

When your base attack bonus reaches +6, the bonus on checks made to sunder an item increases to +4. In addition, whenever you sunder to destroy a weapon, shield, or suit of armor, any excess damage is applied to the item's wielder. No damage is transferred if you decide to leave the item with 1 hit point.

Normal: You provoke an attack of opportunity when performing a sunder combat maneuver.

Improved Trip (Scaling, Combat)

You are skilled at sending your opponents to the ground.

Replaces: *Improved Trip* (core rules), *Greater Trip*

Prerequisite: Int 13, *Combat Expertise*.

Benefit: You do not provoke an attack of opportunity when performing a trip combat maneuver. In addition, you receive a +2 bonus on checks made to trip a foe. You also receive a +2 bonus to your Combat Maneuver Defense whenever an opponent tries to trip you.

When your base attack bonus reaches +6, the bonus on checks made to trip a foe increases to +4. In addition, whenever you

successfully trip an opponent, that opponent now provokes attacks of opportunity.

Normal: You provoke an attack of opportunity when performing a trip combat maneuver. Creatures do not provoke attacks of opportunity from being tripped.

Penetrating Strike (Scaling, Combat)

Your attacks are capable of penetrating the defenses of some creatures.

Replaces: *Penetrating Strike* (core rules), *Greater Penetrating Strike*

Prerequisites: *Weapon Focus*, base attack bonus +1, 12th level fighter, proficiency with weapon.

Benefit: Your attacks with weapons selected with *Weapon Focus* ignore up to 5 points of damage reduction.

When your fighter level reaches 16, your attacks with weapons selected with *Weapon Focus* ignore up to 10 points of damage reduction.

This feat does not apply to damage reduction without a type (such as DR 10/—).

Precise Shot (Scaling, Combat)

You are adept at firing ranged attacks into melee.

Replaces: *Precise Shot* (core rules), *Improved Precise Shot*

Prerequisite: Dex 17, *Point-Blank Shot*.

Benefit: You can shoot or throw ranged weapons at an opponent engaged in melee without taking the standard -4 penalty on your attack roll.

When your base attack bonus reaches +11, your ranged attacks ignore the AC bonus granted to targets by anything less than total cover, and the miss chance granted to targets by anything less than total concealment. Total cover and total concealment provide their normal benefits against your ranged attacks.

Normal: See the normal rules on the effects of cover and concealment in Combat.

Vital Strike (Scaling, Combat)

You make a single attack that deals significantly more damage than normal.

Replaces: *Vital Strike* (core rules), *Improved Vital Strike*, *Greater Vital Strike*

Prerequisites: Base attack bonus +6.

Benefit: When you use the attack action, you can make one attack at your highest base attack bonus that deals additional damage. Roll the weapon's damage dice for the attack twice and add the results together before adding bonuses from strength, weapon abilities (such as flaming), precision based damage, and other damage bonuses. These extra weapon damage dice are not multiplied on a critical hit, but are added to the total.

When your base attack bonus reaches +11, the number of times you may roll the weapon's damage dice for the attack increases to three.

When your base attack bonus reaches +16, the number of times you may roll the weapon's damage dice increases to four. ■

Gaming with a virtual

tabletop (from page 23)

For example, “/roll 1d20+4” can simply turn into “#dagger,” or even a mouse click, tremendously quickening the pace of a session. With Roll20, even the most intimidating feature that deterred me from tabletop gaming—finding players—is easily resolved.

Roll20 has an avid community of tabletop gamers numbering about 53,000 and growing. Many people use the “Looking for Group” feature to find fresh meat for their various campaigns. The categories have even taken tabletop gaming virgins like me into mind by having a “welcomes new players” tag in the description. But even with this feature I found myself not wanting to drop in on people’s games. I viewed myself as that last guy you invite to play basketball just to even out the teams. So, I took my plight to the community forums in the hopes of explaining my predicament. In typing my post, I wanted to seem likable but not desperate, naïve but not ignorant. After sending what I deemed an adequate call to arms, I anxiously waited for a response. In less than a day I received four replies. But the earliest my new-found friends could rally a posse was in three days, so I waited with bated breath for the day that would take my tabletop gaming v-card.

When that day came, I discovered that a lot of the learning process depends on a competent game master, which I thankfully found. His group welcomed me into their ranks, while patiently enduring a three-hour session to complete one encounter. My short time with a group of strangers granted me a sense of camaraderie that I had never gained from multi-player experiences in video games, and an idea began to form in my mind: I must share this experience with my closest friends.

Now, my friends had played a few campaigns together before, but always found it difficult to meet each week with their different schedules and locations. Roll20 is the perfect application for this scenario. With video chat built into the system and the ability to stop and pick up where a session leaves off, it would be easy to set up a weekly session. I petitioned the idea to my friends, who all took some Roll20 tutorials, and it garnered an overwhelmingly positive response. The consensus was that the system simplified all the “shitty parts” of tabletop gaming. The friend we picked as GM decided to take our campaign even further by having us all create it from scratch.

The idea of making a campaign from scratch seemed horrifying, but incredibly exciting at the same time. To interact in a world that we had created, with original characters and backstories, seemed like a dream come true. I started a messaging thread among our group where we slowly built our world and characters. By doing so, I was garnering a

sense of friendship that had been lost because of our physical distances. When the time came for our first session, anticipation was high.

No one had actually used Roll20 for a game yet besides me, so the session started out slowly at first. But it did not take long for rules to become better defined and for the teamwork to grow. At the end of our session we had completed our first encounter. Though our time was short, we all had a blast. The draw to play more of our campaign is great and the fact that we can all video chat makes our sessions even more enjoyable. Now I have a venue where I can frequently interact with the friends I have missed.

By creating such a simple system with a welcoming community, Roll20 has opened the door of tabletop gaming to newcomers and veterans alike. But best of all, Roll20 is a free browser application that requires no download. All you need to do is jump in and play. I can say with certainty that I would have avoided tabletop gaming altogether if not for this system. It is my hope that Roll20 will bring even more people like me into tabletop gaming and let them experience a whole new world of entertainment. ■

Great power for ICONS

(from page 31)

affected area to fall (or otherwise collide with a surface while moving) with a Spatial Control (Coordination) test.

Stunts

Deflection: You can use your Spatial Control level to avoid or block attacks.

Shaping: You can alter the topography of objects or even people, stretching or shaping them like clay. Affected objects return to normal when you stop concentrating.

Spatial Anchor: You can “harden” local space against certain disruptions, making your power level the difficulty for any use of Dimension Control, Dimensional Travel, Spatial Control, or Teleport within visual distance.

Spatial Disruption: You can tear a target apart by scattering it through space, gaining Corrosion at your Spatial Control level, which is usable at extended range.

Spatial Shock: You can create a spatial shockwave that does power level damage to one target at extended range, or all targets within close range of you.

SPIRIT CONTROL

Control. You can control spirits, ghosts, and similar entities. Make a Spirit Control (Willpower) test to dominate a spirit within visual range. If the spirit’s Willpower is higher than both your power level and Willpower, you can-

not dominate it without first tagging one of the spirit’s aspects. A dominated spirit’s personality and goals remain, but it is unable to resist your commands.

The spirit obeys your verbal or telepathic orders. Each time you order a spirit to do something it is strongly opposed to doing, such as a command that runs counter to the spirit’s aspects, you must make a new Spirit Control (Willpower) test to reinforce your control.

Stunts

Deny Death: You can trap a spirit within a fatally damaged body until there is time to heal the body enough to contain the spirit again on its own. You can keep the spirit trapped only as long as you concentrate.

Forced Possession: You can place disembodied spirits into new bodies. Roll a Spirit Control (Willpower) test. If the test fails, the spirit suffers damage equal to the power level. If it succeeds, the spirit takes control of the body, dominating any other consciousness within the body. The spirit retains its own mental abilities and powers and gains the physical abilities and powers of the host body.

Incarnation Awareness: You can remember the events of your past lives. Moreover, you can send messages to your prior incarnations when they were actually living and receive them from future incarnations (though not vice versa). These are excellent opportunities for focused effort, reconstructions, and stunts (substituting Spirit Control level for another trait, see *ICONS*, p. 79).

Spirit Affliction: With a representative link to a target (such as a lock of hair or the classic “voodoo doll”), you can inflict a Rangeless Affliction at your Spirit Control level on a target, with a +2 increase in your difficulty.

Spirit Storage: You can capture and contain disembodied spirits with a major success on a Spirit Control (Willpower) test. The spirits are trapped within a pocket dimension connected to you. Moreover, you can communicate with the trapped spirits. You are immune to any attempts by the trapped spirits to possess or dominate you.

Spirit Summoning: You can summon and control the nearest spirit or ghost with a Spirit Control (Willpower) test.

Spirit Ward: You can create a close area around you, which spirits cannot enter without succeeding on a Willpower test against your Spirit Control power level.

Limits

Exorcism: You can only control spirits to depart bodies that they have possessed and to banish them from the physical plane.

One Type: Your Spirit Control only affects a particular type of spirit, such as ghosts or faeries.

Sleeping: You can use this power only while asleep. If you are awakened, any use of Spirit Control ends immediately. ■

The Gygax family

storyteller (from page 35)

there was a long man who lived in a long house, a long time ago and now the story is long finished," finally giving himself enough time to germinate all our ideas and put them into some semblance of a story, starting with "Once upon a time in a world far different from our own..."

By this time, my father had us all readied for bed, some holding toys, the youngest with their heads safely laid upon the pillows, and Heidi sucking her thumb. Once the main tale of the night washed over all our ears, nothing else in the whole world existed! The lights were dimmed, no TV or other distraction was allowed or even sought after. The youngest child felt comfortable in the darkness with the various voices of the story's characters and the simulated sounds of wind, creature, faerie and or monster, emanating from the master storyteller's lips. Somehow he took at least some element of each child's wishes and whipped them all together to create each night's masterpiece! No child would chime in with any comments until Poppa left us waiting at a cliffhanger. Even then, only one or two comments each would be allowed and then quiet would return, as our father brought the story to its fantastic climax. A general sigh of satisfaction would

emanate from all of us, which was quickly interrupted by one child and then everyone else, as we would all beg our father, "Please just one more tale!" Sadly, bedtime would once more be forced upon us all.

As I drifted off to sleep after each of these special story telling evenings, my dreams were heavily influenced and my imagination was greatly stimulated. Much to my mother's shock later, when she would ground me to my room for actions that only my parents found worthy, I would lay on my bed while spinning an object in the air—be it a soup ladle, bowling pin or even a wire hanger—and be lost to anything occurring around me. When either parent would attempt to free me to go outside and be healthy with the other children, I would say, "Not now, I haven't finished the story yet!" Later, when my father would many times be too busy to tell us a story, I would step in, about the time baby brother Luke came along. While my stories didn't necessarily incorporate all the details of the younger siblings, I would still give them a good 15-minutes worth of adventure and, of course, my stories didn't always end with happy endings. Many times the little sisters would get eaten by monsters, with only Elise and I surviving (I kept my closest sister on my side throughout the tales). Sometimes this created a bonus goodie for us, as either Mom would have to come up and calm down the wee ones, or Dad would come

up and give us a new "short" story to repair the damage I had caused.

The ability to create new and exotic heroes and villains was also put to good use by my father, when he would prepare the basement sand table for multiple assorted miniature games, using the same setup for a week or two. One day it would be a *Tractics* game, where one player was Erwin Rommel, needing to check out the defenses of the fortress (pre D-Day), and another player would be a Gestapo agent rounding up partisans, who were, of course, busy trying to cause structural damage, because an outside force of US commandos were hoping to land and blow up the radar tower (as well as have a chance at Rommel). Next week the same layout minus some modern items would be used as a Viking incursion, with a player being the Saxon village elder and another the Norman lord, whose duty was to protect and tax the Saxons...

The one consistent element that Gary has shared with the world and has assisted others to firmly develop on their own—from bedroom to tabletop to conventions leading up to Gen Con, and from *D&D* to all other role-playing games to any computer game that uses a step-by-step progression—is his imagination. Gary Gygax has shared his imagination with all who have shared his time and works, and encouraged the growth of the imagination of all who share his dreams. ■

HOW TIM KASK GOT STARTED

...the fourth issue of the Strategic Review, which shipped "a bit late" in the autumn because of these pressures, names two recent hires: Terry Kuntz, Rob Kuntz's older brother; and Tim Kask, who already had a cameo in Jim Lurvey's GenCon report in the previous section. Kask came on board as Periodicals Editor, and assumed immediate editorial responsibility for the Strategic Review...

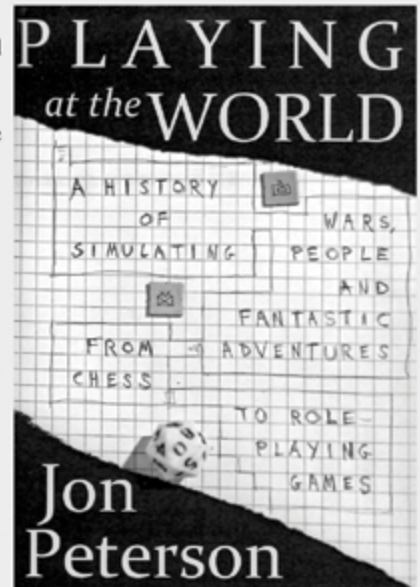
...The teaser promising that "The Dragon is coming!" in Strategic Review #4 alludes to a "coming slick magazine" that Gygax mentions in a letter to Owl & Weasel #9 in October.



With these greater ambitions for the periodicals space, TSR relied heavily on Kask to shape an important and growing segment of their business.

Read more in:

Explore the conceptual origins of wargames and role-playing games in this unprecedented history of simulating the real and the impossible. From a vast survey of primary sources ranging from eighteenth-century strategists to modern hobbyists, *Playing at the World* distills the story of how gamers first decided fictional battles with boards and dice, and how they moved from simulating wars to simulating people. The invention of role-playing games serves as a touchstone for exploring the ways that the literary concept of character, the lure of fantastic adventure and the principles of gaming combined into the signature cultural innovation of the late twentieth century.



<http://playingattheworld.com>

Unreason Press. ISBN 978-0615642048 (cloth). US\$34.95
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MARVIN THE MAGE!

BY JIM WAMPLER

IN THE LAWFUL-GOOD KINGDOM OF ITZASNORE, A LONE, NON-ADVENTURING WIZARD TAKES A SMALL BREAK FROM HIS USUAL ROUTINE OF GAMBLING, DRINKING, AND EVEN MORE GAMBLING... FOR TODAY IS THE ONE DAY OF THE MONTH THAT HE ACTUALLY WORKS AT ANYTHING EVEN CLOSE TO A SEMI-LEGITIMATE TRADE, FOR THIS IS THE DAY THAT...

THE ADVENTURERS ARE COMING BACK FROM THE DUNGEON! MARVIN! THE ADVENTURERS ARE ALL COMING BACK!!

MARVIN'S POTABLE POTIONS MISCIBILITY TABLE

SETTLE DOWN, TARRIN... I'M ALL SET. NOW GET IN THE BACK AND START FILLING FLASKS!



AYE, AYE, OH GRIZZLED ONE!



©WAMPLER12

NOBLE DUNGEON DWELLERS! YOUR ATTENTION, PLEASE! YOU'RE EITHER CLOSING YOUR EYES TO A SITUATION YOU DO NOT WISH TO ACKNOWLEDGE, OR YOU'RE LINAAWARE OF THE CALIBER OF THE DISASTER INDICATED! LET ME EXPLAIN...



POTIONS OF INTELLIGENCE
BUY ONE, GET ONE SAME PRICE
POTIONS OF DEXTERITY
YOU BREAK IT, YOU BUY IT

YOU'VE BEEN TO THE DUNGEON, AND YOU'VE USED YOUR TRUNCHEON, AND NOW YOU'RE MORE THAN JUST A LITTLE PLUNGTEN! YOU'RE SWIMMING IN FRESHLY SACKED COIN...AND THAT STARTS WITH "C"...



WE GOT POTIONS!!

... AND THAT RHYMES WITH "P" AND THAT STANDS FOR POTIONS!

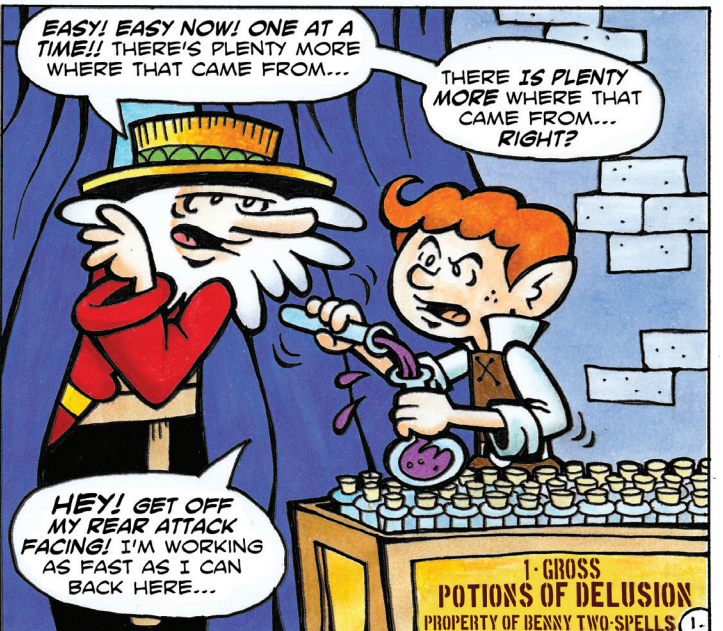
WE GOT POTIONS OF HEALING AND POTIONS OF STEALING! WE GOT POTIONS OF ANIMAL, HUMAN, AND DRAGON CONTROL - STOCK UP FOR A SATURDAY NIGHT! VISITING THAT SPECIAL SOMEONE WHILE YOU'RE IN TOWN? WE'VE GOT OILS OF SLIPPERINESS, ETHEREALNESS, AND LONGEVITY...



THE BARBARIAN KNOWS WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT, RIGHT, SIR?

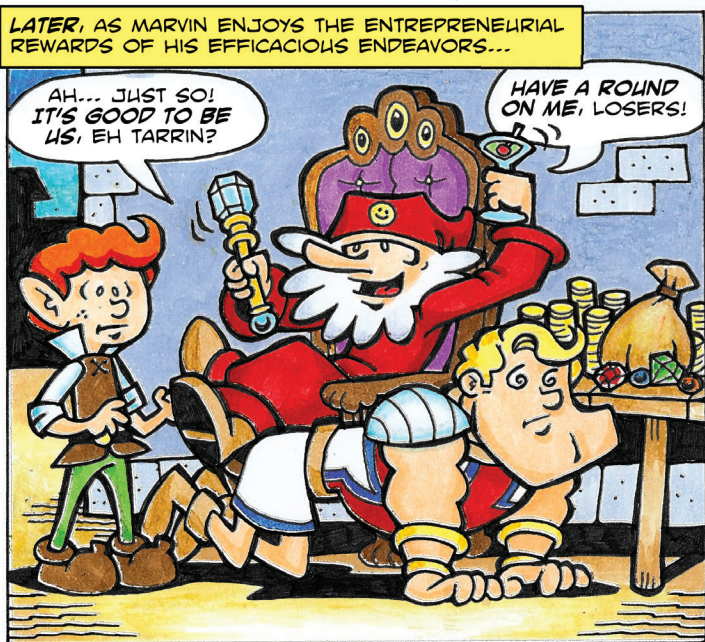
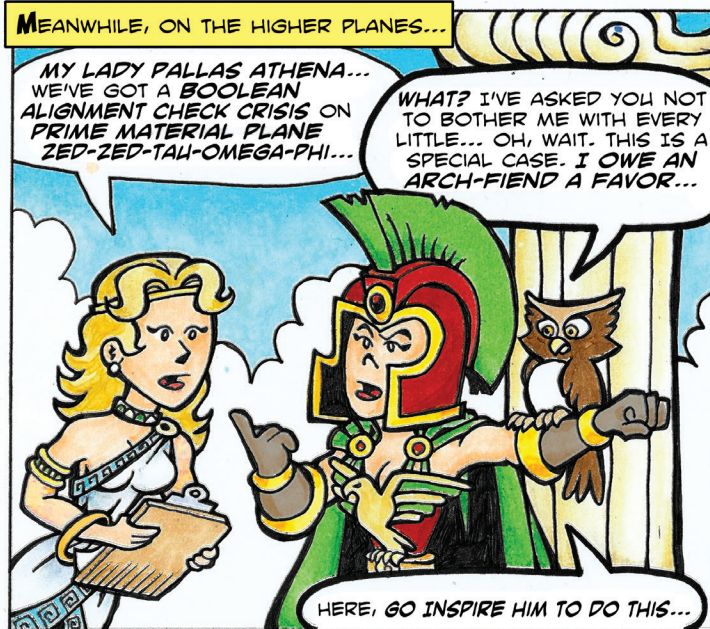
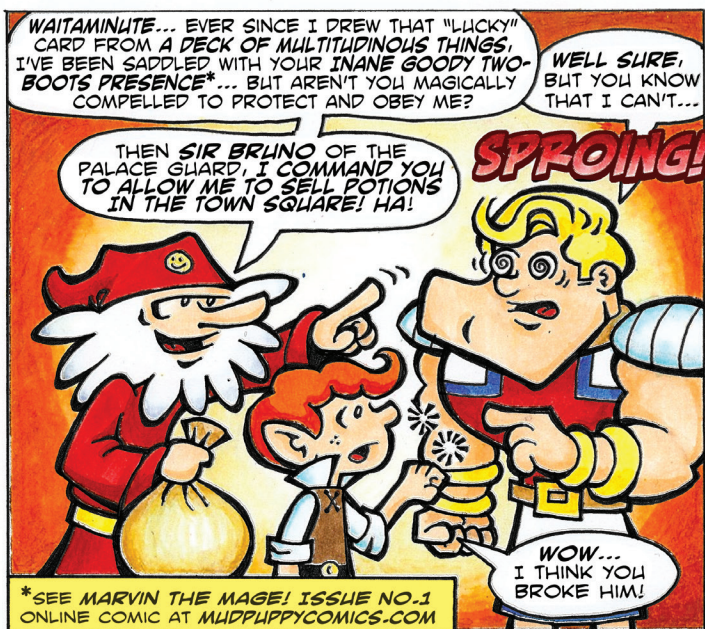
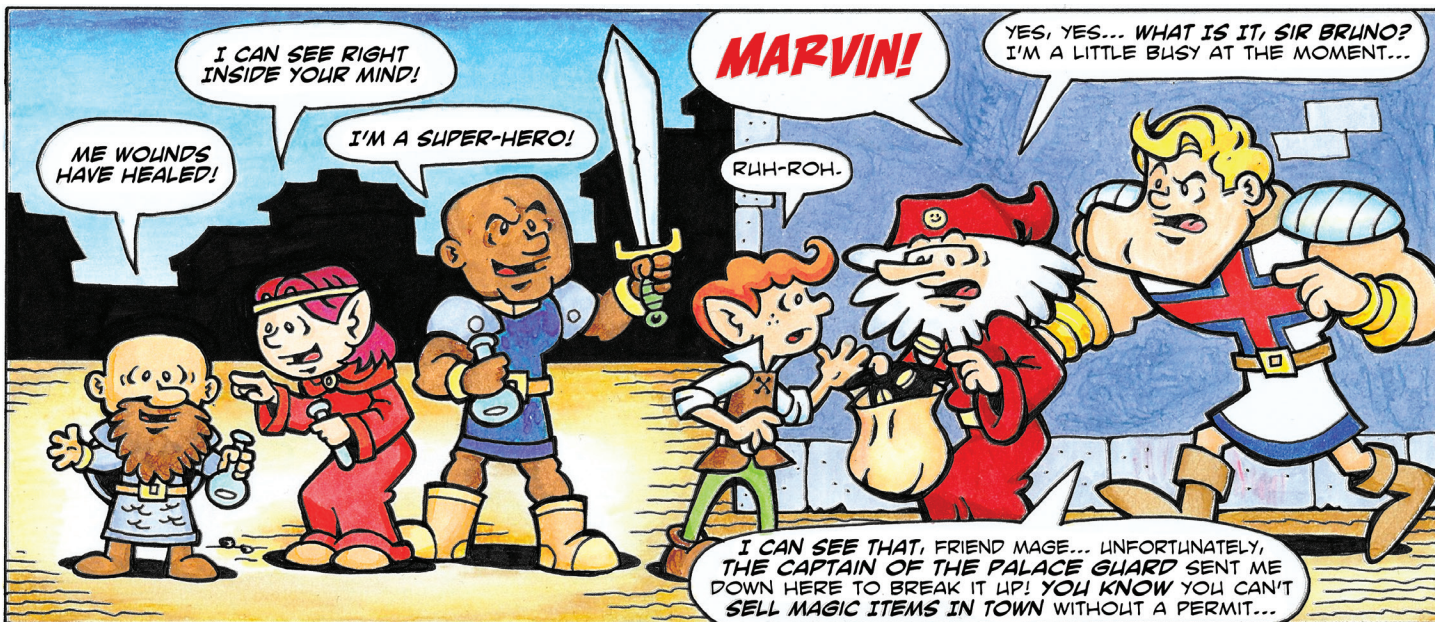
EASY! EASY NOW! ONE AT A TIME!! THERE'S PLENTY MORE WHERE THAT CAME FROM...

THERE IS PLENTY MORE WHERE THAT CAME FROM... RIGHT?



HEY! GET OFF MY REAR ATTACK FACING! I'M WORKING AS FAST AS I CAN BACK HERE...

1-GROSS POTIONS OF DELUSION
PROPERTY OF BENNY TWO-SPILLS 1-

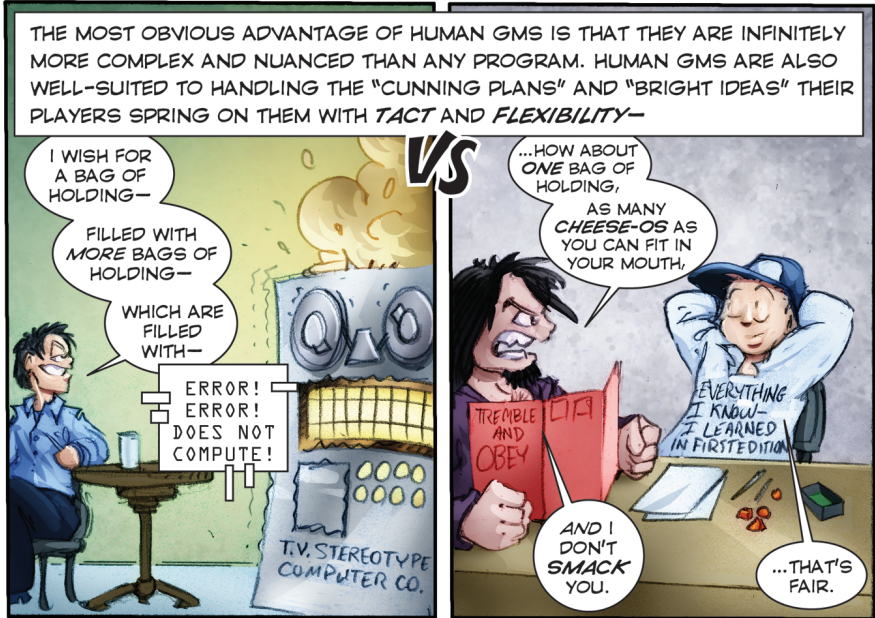


WHAT'S WITH PHIL & DIXIE!



HEY THERE, CAMPERS! LONG TIME, NO SEE!

TODAY WE'RE COMPARING ONLINE RPGS WITH TABLETOP GAMES RUN BY ACTUAL HUMANS!



I WISH FOR A BAG OF HOLDING—

FILLED WITH MORE BAGS OF HOLDING—

WHICH ARE FILLED WITH—

ERROR! ERROR! DOES NOT COMPUTE!

VS

...HOW ABOUT ONE BAG OF HOLDING,

AS MANY CHEESE-OS AS YOU CAN FIT IN YOUR MOUTH,



AND I DON'T SMACK YOU.



EVERYTHING I KNOW—I LEARNED IN FIFTH GRADE!

...THAT'S FAIR.

STILL, PEOPLE LOVE VIDEO GAMES, AND ONE REASON FOR THAT IS IMMEDIATELY OBVIOUS: **SUPERIOR VISUALS!**

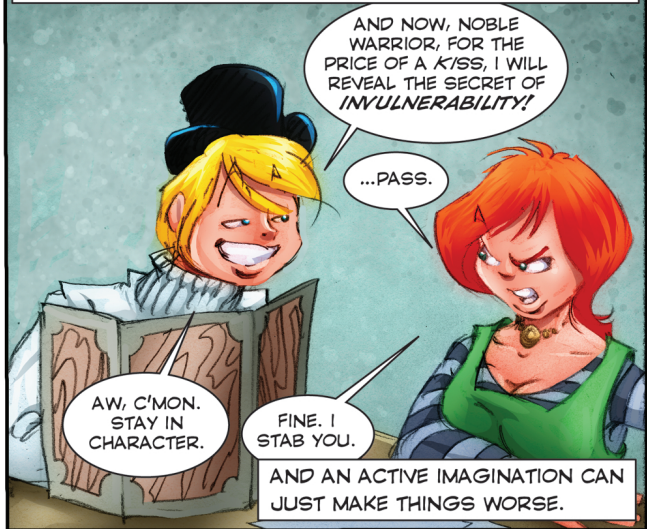


WELL DONE, HERO!

YOU HAVE DARED THE GAUNTLET OF THE ELVEN ONSEN, AND SO HAVE WON THE LEGENDARY PLUS ONE DAGGER OF WHITTLING!

I'M SURE THERE'S ANOTHER REASON, BUT I CAN'T THINK OF IT AT THE MOMENT...

YOU MAY GET BETTER GAMING WITH A LIVE GM, IT'S TRUE, BUT OFTEN, THE VIEW JUST DOESN'T COMPARE—



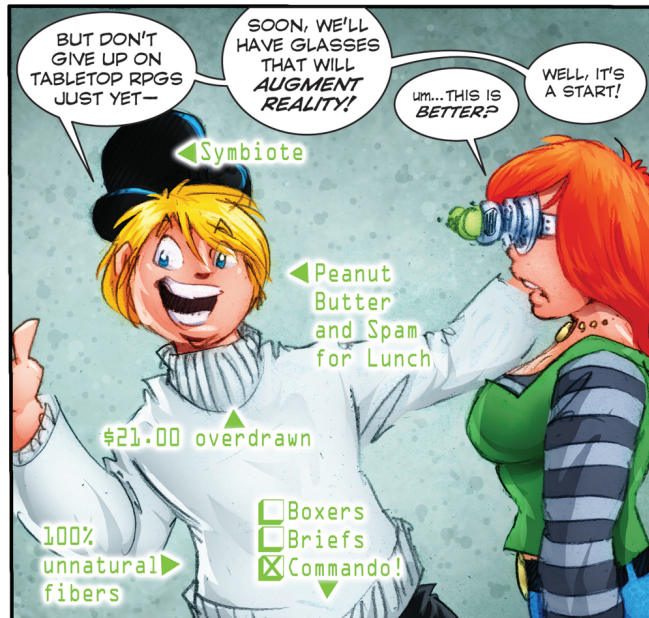
AND NOW, NOBLE WARRIOR, FOR THE PRICE OF A K/SS, I WILL REVEAL THE SECRET OF INVULNERABILITY!

...PASS.

AW, C'MON. STAY IN CHARACTER.

FINE. I STAB YOU.

AND AN ACTIVE IMAGINATION CAN JUST MAKE THINGS WORSE.



BUT DON'T GIVE UP ON TABLETOP RPGS JUST YET—

SOON, WE'LL HAVE GLASSES THAT WILL AUGMENT REALITY!

um... THIS IS BETTER?

WELL, IT'S A START!

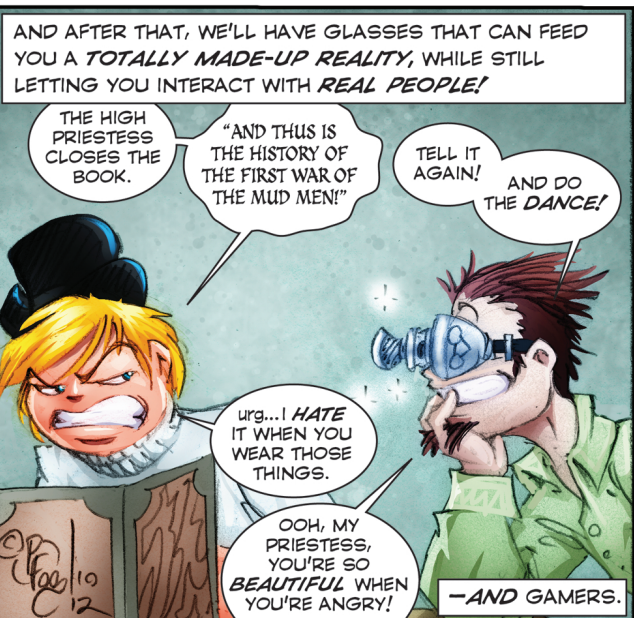
◀ Symbiote

◀ Peanut Butter and Spam for Lunch

▲ \$21.00 overdrawn

100% unnatural fibers

- Boxers
- Briefs
- Commando!



AND AFTER THAT, WE'LL HAVE GLASSES THAT CAN FEED YOU A **TOTALLY MADE-UP REALITY**, WHILE STILL LETTING YOU INTERACT WITH **REAL PEOPLE!**

THE HIGH PRIESTESS CLOSES THE BOOK.

"AND THIS IS THE HISTORY OF THE FIRST WAR OF THE MUD MEN!"

TELL IT AGAIN!

AND DO THE DANCE!

urg... I HATE IT WHEN YOU WEAR THOSE THINGS.

OOH, MY PRIESTESS, YOU'RE SO BEAUTIFUL WHEN YOU'RE ANGRY!

—AND GAMERS.

