

CONFESSIONS OF A DUNGEON MASTER

BY JOHN ERIC HOLMES

"'Be ye for Law or be ye for Chaos?' Shouting the Dungeons & Dragons challenge, my players rush into the fray with their magic war hammers; before getting an answer, their fantasy selves may indulge in murder, pillage, arson, rape. The Dungeon Master's world is sort of a giant Rorschach test."

For each Dungeons & Dragons game, the referee, or Dungeon Master (usually called the DM), must make up a dramatic situation. It usually consists of a set of maps that carefully note every trap, treasure, monster, and magical device the heroes of the story are likely to find. The DM and the other players, out to grab as much treasure as they can, each choose one or more characters who will play out the "scenario." Almost always, the personalities of the characters turn out to be combinations of people's idealized alter egos and their less-than-ideal impulses.

In the game I play every other week with friends, each character is represented by a painted metal figure about one inch high. The top of my gaming table is coated with blackboard paint, so I can sketch in features of the terrain. The players line up their figures in the middle of the tabletop and I draw, say, a pair of parallel lines, on either side of them.

"You're walking down the road," I tell them. "On either side are the dense trees of the Enchanted Forest." I set up a couple of plastic trees to represent the forest. "At the crossroad, you see a raven sitting in a pine tree." I have no figure for the raven, but I set up a representation of the pine tree.

"Probably a talking raven," suggests one of the players.

"Greetings, bird of wisdom," says another player. "We are searching for the ruined city, said to be somewhere near here. Have you any information?"

"Nevermore," says the raven. Of course the DM has to speak his lines for him.

"Just what we need," says one of the other characters. "A wise-ass raven. Ask him if he'd like to have an arrow through his gullet."

"If you turkeys are ever going to learn anything in

the Enchanted Forest, you're going to have to learn better manners first," the raven says, haughtily.

But the players know that the Dungeon Master is a medical school professor, and though his characters have a tendency to deliver lectures on deportment, they are always more bark than bite. The young lady on my left says, "The gnome is going to turn himself invisible and go left down the crossroad."

"There goes that damn gnome again," someone says.

"Grab him," someone else suggests.

"Too late," the DM says, taking the little blue figure off the table. "He's invisible."

At this point I figure the raven, having overheard most of this conversation, is alerted to what the group is looking for. He talks a little longer to the group's nominal leader, the paladin, trying to persuade him that he'll get something valuable out of the witch, in her hut down the side road, if he comes alone, without his unruly-looking companions. The paladin is a knight of religious orders, a fighting man of the church like Sir Calahad. He is bound by vows of chastity and purity, which make him queasy about even negotiating with the witch, whom the group assumes is evil. The doctor who plays this character tries hard to have his character live up to these high standards, but the paladin's behavior has been known to slip. In the meantime, the two thieves in the group have also sidled off down the road, sensing loot. The paladin really has no business consorting with thieves, but the DM is allowed some latitude in these matters.

Sure enough, the raven is the familiar of the old witch of the wood and flies into the clearing at the witch's hut, screaming, "Mother Grillo! Mother Grillo! Strangers a'coming!" The witch comes to the

door of the hut. The invisible gnome is poking around the back of the clearing, investigating the cages where the evil lady keeps her victims. Once again the paladin tries to negotiate with the opposition for magical help or information; behind him the magician sets off a "charm person" spell that fails to affect the witch. The raven cries out more warnings. Behind the witch the two thieves climb through the window of the hut. Avoiding the bubbling caldron on the fire, they start ransacking the rest of the house. When the other characters try to close with the witch, she turns one of them into a duck and rushes back into the hut. The two thieves jump on the old lady with drawn swords, but she seizes her broom and flies out the window. Outside, one of the characters tries to destroy the witch's lair by setting the roof of the hut on fire; the raven flies away screaming into the woods, and another character changes himself into an owl and takes off in hot pursuit.



This game has been running every other Sunday night in my house for more than a year. The group ranges from five to ten, and we play for four to five hours. It began after I edited a Dungeons & Dragons book: some people at the medical school discovered my interest in the game, and asked me to be their regular DM. I was willing, having run an earlier game that began after my two sons introduced me to the hobby, and that lasted nearly four years.

Our Dungeons & Dragons characters have the usual series of attribute scores for strength, intelligence,

lady who plays this character is a nurse who has a very independent personality but who is not as reckless and foolhardy as her alter ego in the game. The two daring and totally amoral thieves are played by a young doctor and a graduate student, both of whom, as far as I know, in real life are scrupulously law-abiding.

My earlier game consisted largely of teenage players, and these young people, caught in the awkward adjustment to the adult world, produced game characters who were suave, cool, deadly, and superbly adjusted to their world—samurai, elfen magicians, and clever hobbits. For these characters, there were few problems that could not be quickly solved by blowing somebody up with a fireball spell or slashing them to pieces with a shining katana. One of these players, grown older and wiser, now says wistfully, "In real life you can't cleave the IRS man with your broadsword."

The outlet for sheer bloodthirstiness continues to function in my present game, where many of the players are in their 20s. One gentle and kindly physician's favorite character is a sub-moronic dwarf named Grog. About the only thing that Grog knows how to say is, "Kill! Kill!" This is also what he frequently does, unless restrained bodily by his companions. His penchant makes him a definite hazard to the other characters, because although he rarely attacks them, he will often provoke reprisals against his group by attacking innocent bystanders. Still, the players' characters tolerate and even enjoy his antisocial behavior.

Lady Kroger once invited the group to spend the night in the castle. At dinner, Grog drank to excess. Grog never drinks any other way.

"Uungh; have drink," said the ugly dwarf, who was sitting on Lady Kroger's left.

"Certainly not . . . look out, you've spilled it on my dress!" the fair damsel cried.

"Your companion, sires, leaves much to be desired," remarked Lord Kroger, who suffers from lycanthropy but is otherwise a pretty decent guy.

"Yes, you're right. We've often thought so ourselves. Leaves a whole new dwarf to be desired," the group chorused.

While more wine was being brought from the cellar, the cleric tried to discern the nature of the evil that hung over their host, the magic-user tried to read Lady Kroger's mind, and one of the thieves sneaked down the cellar stairs behind the wine steward. The thief said he was going to try to hide in the shadows. Grog announced he was going to try to get his hand into the top of Lady Kroger's dress.

"Stop him, somebody," hissed the cleric, but too late. The Lady screamed. Guards came running. The magic-user and the hobbit began apologizing.

"Ugh, fight!" grunted the dwarf, falling backward out of his chair. Righting himself, he managed to knock down the chandelier and flatten a guardsman with his war hammer before being subdued, dragged down into the castle dungeons, and chained to the wall, where he kept the other prisoners awake all night with his drunken shouting and belching.

Once, the brilliant young doctor who invented Grog, the top man in his graduating class, brought his girl-

After my young players reached adolescence, their characters became interested in sex and, eventually, marriage.

wisdom, constitution, dexterity, and charisma. We roll dice at the start of the first game to determine the size of the scores and use the official rule books for the percentage chances of what will happen to each type in tight circumstances (dice rolls determine whether the character "makes" that percentage). But the actual conduct of our characters is up to us. Since Dungeons & Dragons is played as a series of games in which the same cast of characters appears time after time, part of the fascination is watching our alter egos grow and develop as our imaginations go to work.

The gnome in this game is always wandering off and getting into trouble, sometimes holding up the game or having to be rescued by the rest of the group. The

friend to a game. When Grog went into action, several of the rest of us turned to her. "That's Grog," we explained. "You've probably never seen Grog before."

"Oh yes," she corrected us sweetly. "I think I've been in bed with Grog several times."



The level of violence in this make-believe world runs high. There is hardly a game in which the players do not indulge in murder, arson, torture, rape, or highway robbery. I have even had players tell me that their characters had stopped on the way to one of my underground dungeons to spray-paint graffiti on the walls!

I don't think this imaginary violence is any more likely to warp the minds of the participants than is the endless stream of violence in TV, movies, or literature. Quite possibly it provides a healthy outlet for those people who are imaginative and inclined to enjoy the game.

In order for the game to provide vicarious release for unacceptable behavior, the entire group of players must go along with the convention that game roles are independent of the actual players. One teenager, who rarely complains, objected with untoward violence when his centaur character was robbed and abused by a character of his stepbrother's. "It's the magic-user who did that to you," protested the other lad, "I didn't do it, he did. He's a thoroughly despicable person!"

This kind of interplay between the characters on the game table is great fun for the Dungeon Master. During a lull in the action, I am apt to receive several notes from those present: "My thief is going to pick the paladin's pocket." "My magic-user is casting a Detect Magic on the staff the gnome just found." "My dwarf is going to slip some of the unknown potion into the elf's canteen." While I do have difficulty, sometimes, deciding (and remembering) who did what to whom, the players never erupt into bloodshed. The characters do, rather frequently.



The sexual innuendos of my teenage Dungeons & Dragons game did not become manifest until my players reached their adolescent growth spurt. Before that, the game was all hack, slash, loot, pillage, and burn. Later, characters began to get interested in sex and, eventually, marriage.

At times, the characters' interactions will suddenly take on new meaning because of the players involved. My group of teenage players' characters broke into the palace gardens and were confronted by the figure of a graceful unicorn. Properly awed by this magical beast, they held a whispered conference about how to capture the creature. The powers of a unicorn make it particularly valuable if it can be subdued. Everyone knew what that required.

"Do we have any virgin female characters in the group?" There were female characters present because there were female players at the game that night. Male teenagers never play female characters.

"My Naga is a virgin, of course," said one player.

"Now wait a minute," said one of the males, "remember my magic-user has been trying to seduce her for the past three games. I think there's a good chance he may have done it."

There was a minute pause. Everyone knew that the same tension existed between the young couple at the table that now made itself felt between the two imaginary personages in the magical garden.

"Do you think that's possible, Cicely?" I asked.

"I think she'd refuse."

"What do you think the chances are that she got talked into it?" I asked.

"Fifty percent," said the young suitor.

"Twenty-five," said Cicely.

To resolve such disputes in the game, the DM, who may ask for advice, declares a percentage probability

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that an event might occur. The player rolls two dice that are read as a percentage to see if the event did occur. When one is attempting to resist a charm or magic spell this is called a "saving throw" and if the dice come up at a lower percentage, the character is saved from the spell.

"Twenty-five percent it is," I said, exercising my prejudice in favor of females. "Roll the dice."

Cicely easily made her saving throw against the magic-user's seductive wiles, and her Naga was acknowledged as a virgin. She quickly advanced to attempt to tame the unicorn. (The *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Monster Manual* specifies 25 percent odds for unicorn taming, and again the Naga made her throw.) M.A.R. Barker, a professor at the University of Minnesota who is inventor of the marvelously imaginative Dungeons & Dragons-type game, *Empire of the Petal Throne*, has a saying for such occasions. "The dice," he confides to his players in a dramatic voice, "never lie."

And what about the young lady and her suitor? Did Cicely, like her Naga, also make her saving throw? (I'm too chivalrous to ask, but I think I know the answer.)

The dice never lie.



Twice I have had players introduce themselves into the game. We agree upon the attribute scores for each character, and they are allowed to bring into the magical, medieval world of the game their 20th-century

knowledge, but no artifacts. In neither case have these characters, in my opinion, been very successful Dungeons & Dragons adventurers.

Twentieth-century characters try to achieve power by using their modern knowledge, like the Connecticut Yankee. They waste a lot of time trying to discover magnetism, invent gunpowder, or build a spring-loaded missile thrower. In the framework of the game, much of this specialized knowledge is useless; only rarely does it benefit their fellow treasure hunters. More useful to all hands are less intellectual pursuits: climbing sheer walls, seeing through keyholes, casting lightning bolts, or cleaving people in two with one's broadsword.

Modern American teenagers, when they thrust themselves into a world of miracle and magic, tend to hold back, stand in the rear, and shout helpful advice. Their fantasy selves, be they hero or monster, are more likely to rush into the fray swinging their magic war hammers, and shouting the challenge: "Be ye for Law or be ye for Chaos?" Frequently, they hop somebody over the head before they get an answer. The characters from the "real" world survived in that world, but they did not earn much of a reputation for heroism.

When one of these alter egos gets killed, the game player sometimes suffers psychic shock and may go into depression. As Dungeon Master, I dislike situations in which characters get killed. You might think

can sustain before dying) of the wounded. When a character is slain, the cry "Cleric!" goes up from the treasure hunters. The assembled clergy rush to the fallen one, and amidst the sound of rolling dice cry: "I restore three hit points!" "I give him six!" "There, now he's back up to nine points—are you going to let him live?" It's against the rules, but I often do.

It is possible to cheat, just as in any game, but it is not easy. In my game, the die rolls are made out in the open, with no chance for deception. The greatest temptation to cheat comes when the very life of your game persona is at stake. The DM cries, "The minotaur charges, horns leveled at your chest." He rolls a die and continues, "It's a hit. You take [another die roll] five more points of damage." The hapless player looks down at his record sheet and sees that five more "hit points" will kill his character. The calculation, however, is one that he must scribble on his record sheet himself, and so he could just make a mock notation and declare to the other players, "I'm still alive."



The Dungeon Master's job is to provide an interesting game. Not too easy—the characters should always feel a sense of danger and lurking menace—but not too difficult—the characters should be able to swagger through much of their world with firm knowledge that they are heroes. For the uncertain or neophyte DM, TSR Hobbies, the firm that invented the game and its franchised Judges' Guild, provides premapped dungeon adventures. I find, however, that creating my own dream world is much more fun, although much more work. I spend at least as much time preparing each session as I do playing it. Moreover, just as Dungeons & Dragons players sometimes begin to think of their characters as real persons with a separate existence of their own, the Dungeon Master sometimes begins to think, "I wonder what is *really* beyond the Southern Jungle," forgetting that he alone has the power to put something there. The make-believe world assumes an eerie sense of reality.

This "alternate universe" feel to the world of Dungeons and Dragons is produced by its *social* reality. It is a shared fantasy, not a solitary one, and the group spirit contributes to the tremendous appeal of the game. You always wanted a world of magic and mystery to explore, and now a group of your friends gathers every two or three weeks to explore it with you. For a few hours, everyone agrees to accept that world, to accept your pretense that you are a magician who can throw exploding balls of fire from one hand. The fantasy has become a reality, a sort of giant *folie à deux*, or shared insanity.

I have never mapped more than a small patch of my dream world. Professor Barker, inventor of The Empire of the Petal Throne, has created an entire planet with its races, cultures, religions, and, since he is a linguist, all its languages. What I have done, and what most DM's have done, is use the imaginative creations of my favorite authors to map my worlds.

The adventurers step down through the apparently solid rock floor of the crater and see the jungle-filled

For a few hours, the fantasy world of magic and mystery explored by a group of friends is a reality; a sort of giant shared insanity.

that as a physician I would be injured to death, but the reverse is true. In my workaday existence I have to endure the deaths of persons I know and feel responsible for, but in my fantasy world I don't want this to happen, and my players know I hate to see one of their personae killed. Other DMs play a very different campaign—for many, a game is successful only when half the players get killed off.

I usually provide reasonably easy alternatives to death, like wish rings and resurrection. Then, too, my friends know that they can often persuade me to twist the rules to permit a lethally smitten character to survive via healing. Most of my adult players are doctors, medical students, or nurses, and they have a touching faith in the magic of healing. In Dungeons & Dragons, the art of healing is the province of the clergy, and only such miraculous healing, by the laying on of hands, restores the lost "hit points" [or number of injuries one

valley deep below. Now the sky overhead fills with luminous green mist. In the distance they hear the ominous beat of drums. Faint in the misty distance they see the great yellow stone, the giant topaz, set into the black cliffs. Now, softly on the breeze, comes the sound of human voices, chanting.

My players, I am betting, have never read A. Merritt's *The Dwellers in the Mirage*. They do not know the terrible secrets of the worship of Khalk'ru, the Dissolver, and they do not know the dreadful risks of invading his realm.

At other points in the game, my players have wandered through bits of Barsoom and Hyperborca, through worlds created by Edgar Rice Burroughs, Robert E. Howard, H. Rider Haggard, A. Merritt, H.P. Lovecraft, and Clark Ashton Smith. Sometimes they recognize where they are, sometimes they do not. One of the disappointments of a DM is to prepare what seems like a particularly beautiful or dramatic scenario and then have the player characters walk through it, not seeing the subtleties, not sharing the referee's sense of wonder.

Slogging across the barren sands of the Desert of Irem, one party sees in the distance the shattered ruins of a gigantic stone statue. The caravan route they are following brings them closer. As they pass the basalt fragments they come to the base of the fallen statue and make out the hieroglyphs carved there—the name Ozymandias. They travel on, uncaring.

The Dungeon Master's world is a sort of giant Rorschach Test.



Part of the excitement of being the Dungeon Master is that the players will often do something so unexpected that it takes all the DM's wits to keep up with them. Every good DM, no matter how compulsively he or she plots, plans, and maps each adventure in advance, has had occasion to improvise wildly.

Dave's paladin had incurred the enmity of one of my sorceresses. She held him responsible, with some justification, for the death of her husband and swore unholy revenge. She sought out a particularly dangerous book of magic and successfully summoned the Mi-Go, the Fungi from Yuggoth, some of H.P. Lovecraft's more hideous interstellar demons. It was a moonlit night. The paladin and his friends were busily engaged in fighting a tribe of gremlins in another part of the forest. The awful Fungi swooped down on the unsuspecting knight, snatched him into the air, and vanished into the night sky before his companions had time to react.

The paladin came to in a bare stone cell. A tiny window showed him a black starlit cyclopean city. His weapons and armor had been removed. Yuggoth is modeled on the planet Pluto in the outermost reaches of our solar system. The poor paladin unsuccessfully tried forcing his way out of his prison and tried several spells, without result. The window showed his cell to be thousands of feet up the sheer side of a black stone building. The door opened and three of the Mi-Go entered. Although Dave has never read Lovecraft, he

knew he was in big trouble, confronting a fate that is *really* worse than death.

"What are you going to do?" I asked. His fellow adventurers back on earth shouted encouragement and advice, which, sadly, the paladin could not hear.


"I'm going to get down on my knees and pray real hard." It was an entirely appropriate response for the virtuous knight, but it was one I had not anticipated. I quickly opened my *Dungeon Master's Guide* to "Divine Intervention." The basic die roll for success is 100 percent, that is, it happens once every one hundred times. These terrible odds are softened if one is a cleric of the deity evoked, has been particularly devout, or is in a situation the Divine Will would be sure to disapprove. All of these considerations applied, although in my opinion the paladin had not been exemplary in his conduct recently, which was how he got into trouble. I mentally decided to give him at least a 10-point leeway.

I explained that a die roll near 100 was required for an answer to his prayers. With the players holding their breath, Dave threw the polyhedrons: 99!

The paladin prayed.
With only seconds to consider, I invented an angel to save him and warned: "Now keep your nose clean."

The challenge was now mine; I had only seconds to consider what would happen. I took a deep breath.

"There is a crash of thunder and a flash of lightning from the black cloudless sky as the outer wall of the cell is blown away. Poised in the air is a huge angel with giant white wings and a golden halo. Before the creatures can move, the angel seizes you in his arms and flies up and away. There is a sensation of dark and cold and great rushing flight. You are looking down at the forest in moonlight as the angel gently descends to earth. He puts you on your feet and says, 'There. Now keep your nose clean.' He's gone."

To my delight the players said, "Wow." I had managed to successfully obey the imperatives of our joint imaginary creation. The dice never lie. 

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