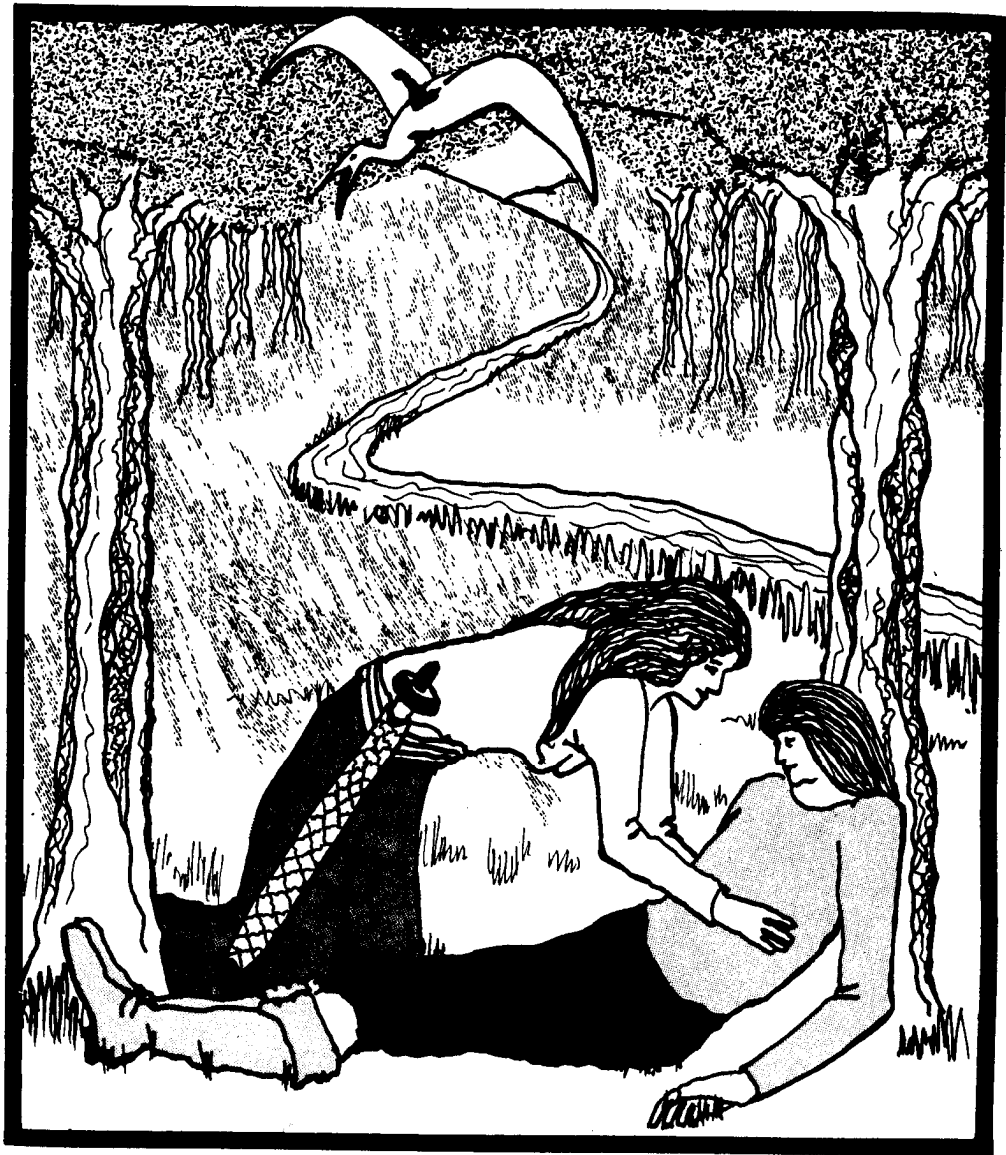


WHAT IS ALL THIS STUFF?



Beginner's Guide to Fantasy Role-Playing

"What is all this stuff?" Yes, we've heard that more than once, as new RC readers, paging through the magazine, discover articles talking about fantasy lands, epic games, and role-playing; not to mention, abundant references to dragons. The following article, reprinted from the premier issue of *Different Worlds*, goes a long way toward answering that question. It is one of the clearest, most comprehensive explanations of fantasy role-playing (otherwise known as FRP) we've seen.

It should also give you an idea of why computer nuts are often attracted to this form of gaming. You want lots of variables and excitement and programs that "learn?" Well, consider the possibilities in FRP. For practical tips on how to apply a computer in the early stages of play, read the Dragon's comments in our continuing series on *Runequest*, which returns next issue.

Different Worlds is a new role-playing magazine from The CHAOSium (P.O. Box 6302, Albany, CA 94706). Subscriptions are \$9 for one year (six issues).

—LB

BY CHARLIE KRANK

Few indeed are the days when someone hasn't come into the store and asked, "What is all this stuff?" What they were looking at are the miniature figures and the rule systems of fantasy and science-fiction role-playing games. The first of these was a fantasy game which began about five or six years ago called *Dungeons and Dragons*. Now, there are several very good systems on the market.

Well, I got so tired of trying to explain what all of this means (and only succeeding in making them even more confused), that I decided to write an article for those who have never even heard of role-playing. To do this in some sort of logical manner, I have broken the game down into its major components and begin with a definition of what Role-Playing is.

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THE DEFINITION

Role-Playing began as an attempt to capture the mystery and adventure of a fantasy world, such as Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. A place where magic not only exists but is an accepted practice and even a way of life. Imagine reliving Frodo's trek across Middle Earth or Elric's adventures with Moonglum in the Young Kingdoms. It is also an experiment in the interaction between people. One person (the referee) presents a situation complete with conflict and reward, and the others (the players) try to combine their talents to overcome the challenge and gain the reward. The conflicts usually tend to involve monsters or bad guys, but can also include riddles, traps or mazes. Though the rewards often are a form of treasure (gems, gold or magical items), they can be more abstract, such as solving that riddle, figuring out the trap or making it through the maze.

If the players survive the adventure, they have some method for the advancement of their characters — a form of growth process. As the characters advance, they experience an increase in their fighting skills usually accompanied by an increase in the amount of money found on adventures. Players will use this money to replace, improve or augment their equipment. In a complex world, they may also be required to buy food and lodging.

Role-Playing is not a competitive type of game like chess or the standard war-games, but is rather a cooperative effort on the part of the players to defeat the referee's monsters. Also, there is no true "win" in the game. Each adventure in the game builds on the one before, almost as if each adventure were a chapter in a book. If the player's character survives, he will participate in the next adventure with a more powerful character. If not, he must start over with a new character.

At this point, it may be helpful to look at just what the referee and players do in the game and how they go about resolving the conflicts.

THE REFEREE

In any Role-Playing system, one person has the job of the referee, and serves several purposes. First, it is his responsibility to create the world in which all of the action in the game will take place. The complexity of this world can vary greatly. It can be as simple as a couple of rooms below a castle or as complex as a whole planet, complete with history, continents and a multitude of ongoing adventures.

It all depends on the referee's ambition and the amount of time available to work on it. One very popular time-saving device is to borrow a framework and history from some existing mythos. Of course one of the most popular is J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Other popular works include Howard's *Conan*, Moorcock's *Elric*, Le Guin's *Earthsea* trilogy and Leiber's *Lankhmar*. CHAOSium has its own fantastic world of *Glorantha*.

Once the referee has determined this structure, he then populates the different areas, be they dungeon rooms that he's drawn out on paper, or the wilderness areas located on his maps, with monsters. The term "monster" is used here and in many rules systems to indicate the animals, humans, and human-type creatures in the world. This would include, for example, the friendly Elven Magic User who, for a price, will show the adventurers out of the area they have gotten lost in.

Certain common-sense types of guidelines should influence the referee's placement of monsters. Large dragons, for instance, would need an immense room if they were not to feel cramped (remember that they do have to stretch their wings at times). Also, certain monsters just naturally do not get along well together. Just a little time spent considering these factors will add incredibly to the believability of play.

The next task of the referee is to place the treasure in his adventure. Usually, when a party runs into a room, almost gets killed, but does succeed in dispatching the monster, the group expects to find a good deal of treasure. I, however,

find it more stimulating when the amount of booty is just enough to pay expenses until the next adventure and possibly replace or improve my weapons and armor.

This type of campaign style serves several purposes: first, it provides continued motivation to adventure; second, it vastly increases the value of plate mail and finely made weapons and, finally, it helps prevent the players from acquiring an arsenal of super-powered goodies and aids with which they breeze through hordes of baddies without the slightest danger to themselves. The final decision will be up to you, but keep in mind that part of the attraction of a game such as this is the struggle to survive and the uncertainty involved in accomplishing that survival.

A third purpose of the referee is to run all of those monsters which were so thoughtfully scattered about. This will be the closest you get to actually playing in your world. The more life that you can give to those beasties, the more enjoyable will be your game to the players. There will be many times that you will develop a kind of attachment to one of your human or inhuman monsters, but one cold, hard fact that every referee must face is that all your creatures will eventually die (that doesn't mean that they won't take an adventurer or two down with them, though). I'm not saying that you should go out and purposely kill off the characters, for if the players feel that that is your whole motivation, then they may stop playing in your world (and all of your work is down the tubes). Instead, a good referee will play the monsters so as to give the greatest challenge to the players. This will keep the game lively and interesting, and a good deal of fun for all parties involved.

A final purpose of the referee is to answer the multitude of questions that the players will ask. Some will be relatively easy, such as, "What are the chances of my character with a dexterity of 17 making a 10-foot jump onto the back of that orc?" Then will be the times when they ask, "Does a Protection from an Evil Spell apply to an animal who is instinctively protecting his territory from intruders? He may not necessarily be considered evil unless he was sent here purposely to harm us but . . ."

Simpler questions on ability can usually be resolved by a die roll. The more complex questions will require some judgment on your part. If you really cannot decide, the players always have suggestions, not all of which can be mentioned in public. You may want to listen to them, but the final decision will have to be yours. Remember also that what is good for the players is good for the monsters, and vice versa. As you become more experienced, you will find that your game will attain an individuality and style all its own and that the players will be eager to find out if they can master its murky depths.

THE PLAYERS

Before the game starts, each beginning player will generate one or more characters who will participate in the adventure. Players who already have characters will just use the ones they have. Each rule system has its own prescribed method for this determination of characters, but they all have certain points in common. The first step will be to generate scores for certain characteristics, such as Strength, Intelligence, Power, Constitution, Dexterity and Charisma.

These scores will provide both an indication of how your character will act in certain situations, and help determine the profession he should follow. If your character has very good strength, for example, he will be a better fighter and will perform better in strength-related activities such as opening locked doors than someone whose abilities lie more in intelligence. The very intelligent character, on the other hand, will have more of a mastery of languages and spells. Both could accomplish the same end, but use different methods.

The next determination will be the assessment of the amount of damage that your character can take before he is killed. Many systems have this linked very closely with the constitution of the character. During the game, the player will have to keep a running total of his character's hit points. If these are exceeded, then the character is dead. It becomes, therefore, very important to protect your character as well as possible. One of the primary ways of doing this is to buy armor. First, though, you must have some amount of money.

The money with which you start the game can be determined in several ways. Some systems use tables showing different social classes and the probabilities for each, with the classes each having amounts of money available. Others use a simple die roll. However it is done, an amount of money will be allotted. With this, you must purchase weapons, armor (as mentioned above) and supplies. The choice of weapon will be basically up to you.

Some systems have restrictions based on character classes (occupations), social ranks or abilities. The different weapons will cost varying amounts of money and will do different amounts of damage. It is often a wise practice to carry more than one if possible, in case you happen to lose or break one. Armor may also have certain restrictions similar to weapons, but will be more influenced by your intended activities and pocket book. While plate mail will give you about the best protection around, it generally costs a great deal and is not ideal for swimmers. Conversely, the lighter forms of armor, leather and chain, allow a good deal more movement and silence, but don't afford as much protection.

Another use for money will be the purchase of accessory equipment. Unless you can see in the dark, as some races can, then torches are a good idea. Of course you will need to buy provisions and some sort of carrying device. Other things such as rope, stakes and mallet, flasks of oil and the like can also be very useful, but their purchase will have to depend on your monetary situation.

Also remember that money is good for the buying of services, repair of armor and weapons, bribing of officials and so forth.

If things are really tight, you could borrow from the town money-lender (at outrageous prices, of course), but remember that you should find at least a little treasure during the course of an adventure, so don't despair. Also, if your character survives the adventure, his fighting skills will develop. When he becomes good enough, he can begin to hire himself out. The number of ways in which money can be made (or acquired) are only limited by your imagination.

Throughout all of this, you will find that your character will become more and more a part of you. He will begin to develop a personality of his own, and increasingly, you will find that you play the character as an individual. This is the essence of Role-Playing, and one of the prime reasons why it has caught on in the past few years. You are able to live out your fantasies through your character, and his death could result in a real sense of loss.

THE RULE SYSTEM

The most important part of any Role-Playing game is the rule system. At this moment, there are quite a few systems on the market. Here I will present only a few. In later articles, we will try to provide a more complete listing.

If you are more interested in fantasy Role-Playing, you might go to your store and look over these systems. From Tactical Studies Rules (TSR) comes the aforementioned *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Empire of the Petal Throne*. A group in Arizona called Flying Buffalo produces one of the more light-hearted systems, called *Tunnels and Trolls*, and for those of you interested in a good deal of historical accuracy concerning the Middle Ages, look at *Chivalry and Sorcery* from Fantasy Games Unlimited (FGU). FGU also makes a game based on the very popular novel *Watership Down*, a book about a rabbit society, named *Bunnies and Burrows*. Game Designers' Workshop has a game which also closely simulates the mood in the age of honor and chivalry called *En Garde*. Legacy Press manufactures *Legacy*, and CHAOSium recently brought forth *Runequest*!

For those of you more into the science-fiction type of adventure, consider *Metamorphosis Alpha*, a trip through a lost spaceship, by TSR. If you would rather run your own ship, give *Starships and Spacemen* by FGU a try, or even their *Flash Gordon* game. GDW makes another spaceship running game called *Traveller*, and Tyr Gamemakers makes an all-encompassing set of spaceship rules called *Spacequest*. If you always wanted to be a superman, try *Superhero 44* from Lou Zocchi. Finally, if your interests lie more in the Wild West framework, look at *Boot Hill* by TSR or *Wild West* from Lou Zocchi.

When looking for a system to use, talk with the people at the store. They may be able to help you decide which system would best suit you. Then, go home and read the rules through several times before playing, or, better yet, try and find somebody who plays the rules. High schools and colleges are often good places to look.

Once you decide on a system, there are several ways to play. Some people like to play orally. The referee describes the rooms, and the players tell him what they are doing. I prefer to use little 25mm lead figures available in many game stores. They help both the players and the referee visualize the action and greatly aid in determining the distances between the players and the monsters. When using these miniatures, the referee will have to indicate the hallways and rooms of his scenarios. Any method is acceptable, be it toothpicks on a tabletop, chalk on a blackboard or grease pencil on plexiglass, as long as all players understand the scale and the system.

THE RESULTS

Finally, there are several effects of becoming involved in Role-Playing. When I first began, I was buying any and everything that I could get my grubby little hands on (my father never could understand how you could spend so much money on just one game). As a result, I am now the proud owner of hundreds of miniature figures, and enough rule systems to start a small store. You will find yourself staying up to all hours of the night devising ways to subtly eliminate the players. All your free time will disappear, and you become very, very poor. Your games will last through one night and on into the next when you drop from exhaustion, only to awake and begin again. You can always tell a referee by the distinctly "undead" look about him. It's great!

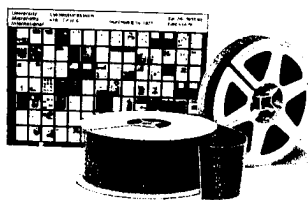
THE FINAL NOTE

If you have any questions or comments concerning a rule system or interpretation of rules, please send them in to *Different Worlds*, care of *Beginner's Brew*, P.O. Box 6302, Albany, CA 94706.

Many of the articles on FRP use various abbreviations that are hobby standards. The following is a list of the more common ones.

D4	a four-sided die
D6	a six-sided die
D8	an eight-sided die
D10	a ten-sided die (a twenty-die numbered one to ten twice)
D12	a twelve-sided die
D20	a twenty-sided die
D100	a roll of two D10s to produce random numbers from one to one hundred
D3	a roll of a D6 with results of 1-2=1, 3-4=2, and 5-6=3
3D6	a sum resulting from a roll of three D6s
10xD6	ten times a roll of D6
100x10D10	one hundred times a roll of 10D10
FRP	fantasy role-playing game
RPG	role-playing game
GM	game master
DM	dungeon master
APA	Amateur Press Association

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