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Good advice
for great
game masters





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Organization

And in role-playing games,

by **Richard Hunt**

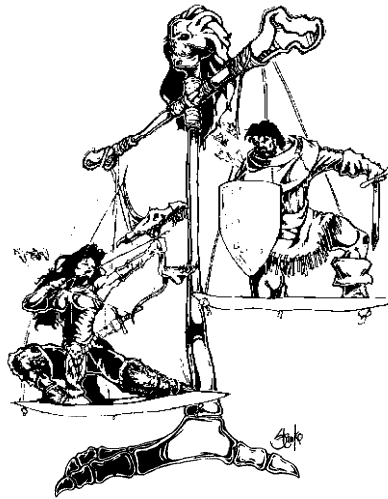
Artwork By Jim Holloway

One commonly overlooked aspect of successfully mastering any fine role-playing game is the ability to organize the game itself. This entails every aspect of the game, from the rules right down to the paperwork that keeps it running from session to session. A badly disorganized game master is a frustrating sight, especially for the players; it can utterly crush their confidence and respect for his ability to run a successful and enjoyable game. A GM who fumbles through piles of rule supplements, forgets crucial playing materials, or loses important information from session to session eventually ruins the continuity of the game. He eventually becomes frustrated and impatient with the effort, as well as the hard criticism of his players, at which point he must either give in or . . . get organized!

Before deciding to get organized, the GM should be sure he really has time to master the game. A lack of time could be the real cause of the disorganization. As we all know, GMs are people, too. If lack of time is the problem, the best thing to do is keep the game as simple as possible. Restrict the use of supplementary material, avoid the use of house rules, or play a little less frequently. This cuts down on the amount of game material the GM must learn and gives him more time in which to prepare. Frankly, playing a simple version of the game is better than not playing at all.

The players can also handle some tasks. In fact, turning over select tasks to members of the group is another good way to find the time for a quality game. Really enthusiastic players, typically those who keep adventure logs, remember past sessions with great clarity, or have a passion for rules accuracy, can often be phenomenal at keeping track of party-related information, freeing the GM for other functions.

Organization is otherwise a very practical matter. Knowing where to put everything is the first step; keeping it there is the second. This article suggests several methods for doing just that, for the



AD&D® game as well as other fantasy role-playing games.

Organizing the rules

The first task every GM must tackle is organizing the rules. Many game systems present the GM with several optional rules systems, even in the basic rule book. Such is the case with the AD&D 2nd Edition *Player's Handbook* and *Dungeon Master's Guide*. Supplements and additional references may also enter the market as time goes on, and these can pile up—even contradict one another—unless the diligent GM stays on top of them. Decide early on what optional rules you are going to use. Upon buying a new supplement, read it and decide what sections you plan to use in the same manner. Write up a list of all optional rules or mark them in the books. I highly recommend the use of Post-It Notes or easy-stick labels so you can change your mind later. Be sure to inform the players of your selections, allowing them to make the same marks in their own rule books as well. Be flexible and allow the players to voice their objections or suggest changes. In the end, this gives you something to point to when a player declares his intention to use an optional rule you may have disallowed.

Many GMs also have house rules. Write these down somewhere and place them in the rule book or a notebook with other materials. If there are a substantial number of house rules, consider writing up a small pamphlet of them to copy and distribute. New players are especially appreciative of being apprised of all house rules from the start.

Material from game magazines (such as this one) can present a special problem

The best solution is to decide which new rules to include. Be very selective and avoid using every new rule or article. Photocopy the table of contents from every issue of relevant magazines and the articles themselves. Place all of them in a loose-leaf notebook, in date or issue order. Plastic tabs may even be used to separate articles on different subjects, particularly new magical items, weapons, spells, monsters, and procedures. Granted, this is a great deal of trouble, but it could be worth it once you have established a system.

A good way to avoid all this is through the use of a computer database; it can be used to create an index of the articles you plan to use sorted by subject matter. Simply print out a listing of the articles you plan to use after updating it each month. I am in the process of converting from photocopies to a data base—it's highly recommended. Of course, this requires that the magazines be on hand during play, perhaps on a nearby shelf.

Once all this is done, physically separate the rule books you intend to use from the ones you don't; this includes house rules and article notebooks. Place all of the relevant ones on a shelf near your writing desk, computer, or wherever you plot each game session, for quick and handy reference. It is also important to keep books from other systems, old editions, magazines, boxed sets, board games, and modules separate. Many of these can still be valuable reference materials, but the core rule books are of higher priority. Separating the rule books solidifies in your mind which references are most important; it also allows you to just grab them all when moving to the play area without having to sort through them every time you play.

Organizing the game world

Once the game rules are organized, the game world material is next. The first step here depends on the game world. If the game world is a commercial product, your task is relatively simple; just put all materi-

is Everything

ve do mean *everything!*

als detailing the world in the original box, placing any supplements next to it. Place this right next to the organized rules on your shelf. Read them often and become very familiar with where specific information (history, politics, etc.) is located. If optional rules have been introduced with a particular world, mark these as you would basic rule books and supplements.

All world maps should be framed (poster frames are inexpensive) and hung or pinned up in the play area if at all possible. Poster frames are really a must, since you can write on them with markers without marring the maps. Leaving the maps in the box does not allow you to become familiar with them. If a world atlas is available (such as with TSR's FORGOTTEN REALMS® and DRAGONLANCE® settings), then by all means use it instead. Atlases tend to be more detailed, highly portable, and by far easier to use than posters. I have seen more than one GM attempt to navigate the party's course on fold-out maps, throw up his hands in disgust, and toss the whole mess on the floor!

The GM should then set about making changes to the world. Just because you bought the game world does not mean that you can't do a bit of judicious pruning. You bought it—it's yours. Take out the things you really hate and add anything you wish. Change the names of places, people, historical events, gods, or anything else, all to suit you. It may even be necessary to make up a few things that the designers failed to develop. For instance, I have found that almost no one includes a world calendar! You could even go so far as to add new cities and develop areas that remain purposefully undeveloped. All major additions should be detailed in writing. Place such information in another loose-leaf notebook or in the boxed set. In this particular case, tell the players only the most obvious changes you've made; let them slowly discover the rest—those parts of the game world that are of your invention. Players who read game-world materi-



al and know it backward and forward will be foiled as well. Do as much or as little as you think needs to be done. If you're satisfied with everything on the whole, don't do anything—it's that simple.

Organizing your own game world is very time-consuming but extremely rewarding. How you develop this world is up to you. First, however, take a look at commercial game worlds for examples of what to do and *what not to do*. A good friend of mine bought a game world, made a ton of photocopies, bashed it with sweeping changes, then discovered that every commercial adventure set on that game world was tens of thousands of miles away from every other adventure requiring great amounts of travel, hundreds of random encounters, or magical explanations for how the party managed to get on the other side of the world! Needless to say, he gave up and moved on to another world, all the wiser.

The real key to beginning is to start with only the basics. This might include world history, the seasons, phases of the moon(s), mythology and gods, kingdoms and politics, geology, wildlife, and ecology. The GM has a unique opportunity to perform many tasks without mastering any of them; he is often expected to be a biologist, meteorologist, geologist, astrologer, historian, political scientist, and artist, to name just a scant few. Players often ask the strangest questions, and the best you can do is be organized enough to know where the answer might be, particularly when the question is about your world. The *AD&D Campaign Sourcebook/Catacomb Guide* is an excellent source of general tips, ideas, and information for *any* game system.

Keep in mind that your game world will *never* be complete. World-building is a very time-consuming process, sometimes lonely (unless you enlist aid), and often unappreciated. If you can live with all of that, then you are probably suited to the task of organizing a beautiful new game world. Unfortunately, no one can tell you how to organize it. Each world is unique in style and its organization depends on the individual. The only surety is that it *must* be organized in the same way that a painting must be painted. Seeking multiple examples is really the best way to decide how your world must be made and ordered.

The GM's notebook

Once the rules and game world are organized, the GM should decide how he wants to organize the day-to-day events of the campaign, the fine details of the characters' lives to come. The GM should put together another notebook to aid in running the campaign from session to session. The organization of this book may vary, but a basic blueprint for this notebook is very necessary; at the very least, it should contain six sections.

The first section should contain the campaign outline. Using standard out-

line format, the GM should write a detailed outline of how the campaign should progress or how an adventure should be introduced. A single outline should generally cover about 3-5 game sessions if possible, and each section should cover a major plot line. A section of a basic outline for an AD&D adventure might look like this:

The Dark Arrow

- A. The heroes have learned that Falcon's Peak is newly inhabited by a tribe of goblins, led by their chief Lorznskik.
- B. They are also aware of the presence of a green dragon, Emer, in the Havenwood, though they have not learned the location of her lair.
 1. An *arrow of dragon slaying* was lost on Falcon's Peak; this information is revealed by the new party member who lost it there, Vaulinon. The party hopes the goblins found the arrow and attacking their lair will yield it.
 2. The goblins do have the arrow, but are unaware of its nature. It is a "needle in a haystack" of tribal arrows.
- C. The party attacks Falcon's Peak and retrieves the arrow. They return to the city in preparation for the confrontation with the green dragon.
- D. The characters travel to the Havenwood, where they discover the location of the old dragon's lair from a pair of slightly green-tinted (from exposure to chlorine gas) ogres. After they interrogate the ogres, the heroes go to the lair.
- E. The heroes kill the green dragon with a successful shot—or they are in deep trouble!

Subplots, such as the appearance of a rival party seeking to gain the arrow, can be planned as well. The main thing to keep in mind is that this outline details what *should* happen, not what *will* happen. The party may decide to sell the arrow or ignore the adventure hooks altogether. That's why the GM should have other outline sections to fall back on. The outline is only a very loose script, and the GM should treat it as such.

The second section of the notebook should contain a very simple campaign calendar upon which to mark the passage of the days of the year, keep track of the current date, and write in small notes. A calendar with twelve months should be divided into four pages, three months to a page, with at least one square inch per day for notes (graph paper is excellent in this regard). At the end of a session, the time of day can be written in for the current date. This section helps keep track of time and events between sessions.

The next section should contain all of the campaign's major nonplayer characters. This can be a very thick section of notebook paper, computer printouts of all NPCs (one to a page), or the like. Index cards are really too small to keep very

good track of NPCs. Computer users can also include a list of all NPCs in the section for quick reference.

The fourth section should contain information on the player characters, including (using the AD&D game as an example) their names, classes, levels, races, hit points, proficiencies, or any other relevant information. The most important part of this section is the magical-item listing, which contains a list of all magical items for each PC. This serves two purposes: First, the GM can gauge the level of magic in the campaign, whether there is too much (i.e., Monty Haul) or not enough (i.e., Uncle Scrooge). He can also keep track of information that should be secret, such as magical charges, unknown functions, command words, and the special status of particularly harmful items (*cursed* items, *rings of delusion*, and sentient weapons). An item should have a question mark by it if it has not been fully identified by its owner. Again, a computer is ideal for keeping track of such things.

The last two sections should contain the adventure and the statistical listing of all monsters in the adventure, respectively. Modules should be photocopied if at all possible, so that sections may be highlighted, struck, or altered as necessary. A plastic sleeve for a three-ring binder (available at office supply stores) can house a fold-out style module. The last section should contain the statistical listings of all monsters in the outline and adventure; thus the goblins, ogres, and green dragon from the outline above would be included in this section, with all hit points pregenerated and ready to go. Hand-drawn or computer-generated forms are equally useful here.

Have campaign, must travel

The final task is to prepare for traveling to the game site, whether it be a dining room twenty paces away, a friend's apartment across town, or a gaming club. Many stores sell plastic containers, cardboard boxes, and other forms of luggage perfect for storing and moving game materials; fishing tackle boxes and cosmetics cases work well. In any case, keeping game materials such as miniature figures, vinyl mats, pens, pencils, dice, scratch paper, calculators, GM's screens, and other effects (trees, rocks, dungeon furniture, etc.) all together, organized, and ready to go on short notice is a necessity.

Using these methods for organizing your game can make as much difference as knowing how to tell a good story or knowing the rules of the game. How can you tell a good story if you don't know where to find it? The same goes for the rules. Players are impressed, at least subconsciously, by a well-organized game. Organizing the game by using these methods can benefit everyone and make the game an event to remember, with an organized GM to thank for it. Ω