Realms of role playing

Let's start pushing the pendulum the other way

by Gary Gygax

There was a long period of time when action, rather than role playing, was the major focus of gaming, and this was especially true with respect to tournament scenarios at conventions. Thus, an AD&D® game scenario would typically stress combat with monsters to achieve the goal set before the characters. Now, the pendulum has swung the other way — much emphasis is being placed on how well the player takes on the role of his or her character. Personification and acting are replacing action of the more direct and forceful type — be it sword swinging, spell casting, or anything else. Before this trend goes too far, it is time to consider what the typical role-playing game is all about.

First, it is important to remember that ('role-playing" is a modifier of the noun "game." We are dealing with a game which is based on role playing, but it is first and foremost a game. Games are not plays, although role-playing games should have some of the theatre included in their play. To put undue stress upon mere role-playing places the cart before the horse. Role playing is a necessary part of the game, but it is by no means the whole of the matter.

Role playing is similar to, but not the same as, role assumption. The latter term is generally used to identify the individual's acceptance of a part which he or she could actually perform. While a child might *play* the role of a parent, an adult would *assume* that role when dealing with his or her children. This distinction is important in the context of gaming because of the stress now being placed upon role playing. Too much emphasis in this direction tends to make playing out an adventure more of a children's "let's pretend" activity than an action-packed game which involves all sorts of fun, including the playing of a role but other fun aspects as well.

A role-playing game should be such that players begin the personification portion as role *play*, and then as they progress the activity should evolve into something akin to role *assumption*. This does away with stilted attempts to act the part of some character. In place of this, players should try to become that person they are imagining during the course of the game, and conduct the actions of their characters accordingly. A spy, for example, speaks in one way to his superiors, in another way when he converses with his equals, and in yet an entirely different way when he is attempting to penetrate an enemy installation and is impersonating a plumber, perhaps. Imple-

mented in this fashion, the concept becomes one of roles within roles.

This applies to all role-playing games, of course. Straining to play a role is certainly contrary to the purpose of the game. The actual reason for gaming is fun, not instruction in theatrics or training in the thespian art. Role playing is certainly a necessary and desirable part of the whole game, but it is a *part*. Challenge, excitement, suspense, and questing are other portions equally necessary to a game of this nature.

Problem solving is the typical challenge in a role-playing game. Whether it is discovering a murderer, finding a magic sword, or seeking to expose a gang of criminals, this element is an integral part of such interactive gaming. And 'note that problem solving, in this context, has to do with a problem to be solved by the *character*, not a problem (such as "How do I role-play this situation?") to be solved by the *player*.

Combat, survival amidst threatening conditions, or stalking an opponent are typical means of adding excitement and suspense into the whole. These are action-oriented portions of the game activity which call for little role playing but a fair amount of role assumption. The magic-user character (and thus, the player of that character) must know his or her spells and how to utilize them efficiently. The explorer must know outdoor craft. Whatever the situation, setting, or character being played, skill — not theatrics — is what is called for here.

Having a goal, understanding it, and remaining steadfast in its completion are likewise necessary to role-playing games. This questing, if you will, again has little or nothing to do with role playing in the acting sense. It is closer to role assumption and is a measure of gaming ability and skill.

Role-playing games are different from other games in that they allow participants to create a game persona, develop this character, and enhance his or her skills and abilities. While some considerable amount of acting is most beneficial to play, this is by no means the sole objective or purpose. The fun of such gaming includes all the other elements mentioned, plus the interactive relationships which develop between the various characters of the players participating. In the well-balanced game, role playing should quickly become role assumption, which then again leads to character role playing — roles within roles!

Not every game of this sort must be completely balanced with regard to all of these aspects. Such a decision is entirely in

the hands of the game master and the players. If a particular group desires to stress acting, or combat, or problem solving, or any other singular feature of the whole, that is strictly up to the individuals concerned. How they enjoy gaming, and what constitutes fun, is theirs alone to decide.

This last point extends not only to players but to products as well. A particular game might be designed to stress one aspect over others. Role playing can be the major thrust, or action and combat, or any of the other elements. Similarly, the underlying game might offer one or another while its accessories and scenarios develop some different aspects. Most games and support material are general and offer a reasonably well-balanced mix.

But is this true for competition situations as well? In contrast to a long period when such tournaments tended to feature hack-and-slash, shoot-'em-up, and blast-'em-out situations, there is now a trend toward downplaying everything except the theatrical side of gaming. This tendency has evidenced itself to a lesser extent in some support materials, it must be noted. The reaction is not altogether unwarranted, for many particpants seem to have been ignoring role playing completely, or nearly so, in their games. Instead, it is usual for such games to stress direct, usually violent, action. This is a true detriment to fully appreciating the scope of role-playing games; as with most things, one extreme is just as undesirable as the other.

The current vogue of placing seemingly undue importance on the role-playing portion of the game is simply meant to inform and educate participants about a very important segment of what differentiates these games from other types of games. It is to be hoped that the needed training thus afforded will enable game participants to go beyond role *playing* of their characters and enter into role *assumption* instead. Once it is understood that role playing is a vital ingredient of the game, and players understand how to actually accomplish it, the undue attention can be discarded.

Balanced games are certainly the most enjoyable sort for the great majority of players. A meal does not consist of but one thing — if it is to be an enjoyable one. By the same token, a role-playing game must have all the ingredients which allow it to be varied and enjoyable. Playing and assumption of roles, interpersonal dealings, action, problem solving, excitement, suspense, and questing are all important to make the

whole. The portions can be mixed in different amounts, but each should have a degree of existence within the scope of the whole.

It is common for scenarios to identify the level of experience and skill recommended for those utilizing the material they provide. Perhaps it would be worthwhile to also identify any particular stress the scenario places upon a certain aspect of the game activity — role-playing, action, problem solving, or any other.

Tournament scenarios and competitions might also benefit by such identification. Prospective entrants would then be able to determine which aspect they favor, or possibly need to learn more of, before they entered the event. Participants who find their enjoyment lies in one area or another would thus be able to select events optimal for their tastes and avoid those which they might find less fun — making the competition experience more enjoyable for everyone who does take part. Is the player who has difficulty personifying a well-understood character any different from an excellent thespian who misplays the game otherwise? By being able to identify the focus of a scenario, not only would players be informed, but they would also be given the opportunity to round out their abilities in weak areas if they chose to do so.

Play of the game is the thing. Play includes development of the character and personification thereof, role assumption and role playing, and the rest. After all, fantasy in whatever form is integral. Whether fighting a dragon, piloting a starship, or shooting it out with evil enemy agents, the action imagined during the game is what really makes it fun. The pendulum did need to move a bit to balance things, but it must not go too far, or the realms of role playing will become small and constricted instead of being — as they should be — as broad and varied as the imagination.
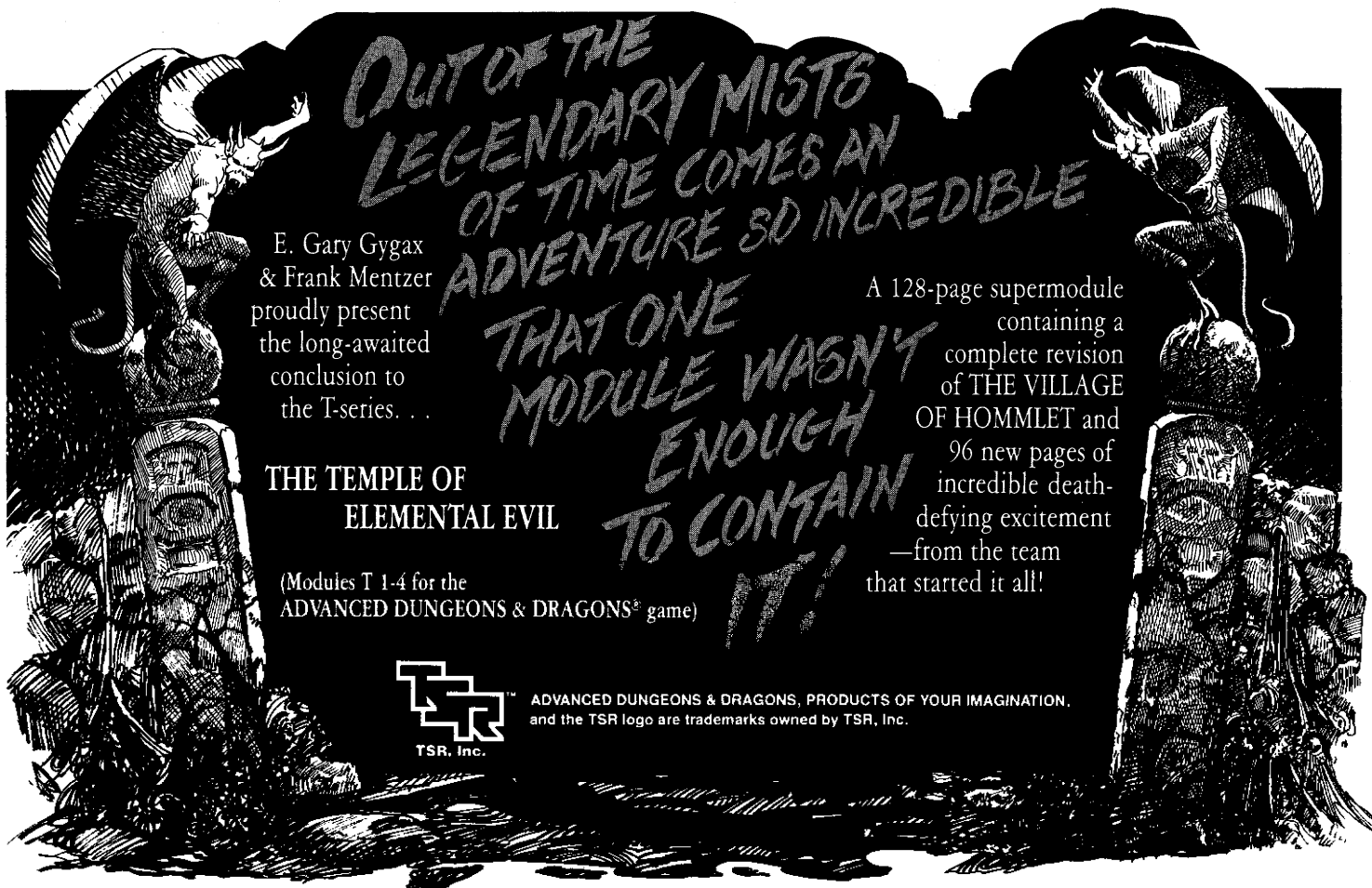
Gord: More to come!

Gord of Greyhawk has adventures in other places besides these Splendid Pages. What's this, you ask? I shall explain . . . . As those of you who read "At Moonset Blackcat Comes" in issue #100 are aware, there are books on the way which are all about this young thief. Well, Gentle Readers, in addition to *Saga of Old City* (scheduled for release in November) and its sequel, *Artifact of Evil* (January 1986), there is more! DRAGON® Magazine is, after all, a gaming journal, and this Indefatigable Key-pounder can't take up its space with stories of Gord and Associates as they go about their affairs in that strange city and its environs in probability and time. There are more adventures to be told than those chronicled in the two abovementioned books, and these tales will be appearing in AMAZING® Stories Magazine.

In case you can't find AMAZING Stories at your local newsstand, don't despair. The TSR subscription department is ready and able to take your order well in time for you to receive the May 1986 issue, which will contain *The Strange Occurrence on Odd Alley*, a story of about 15,000 words. Gord and his companion Chert stumble into something unexpected, and when the tale is concluded, the duo is off on yet another rollick. What's this, you say? Some devious device to snare us? But of course! There is a sequel to "Odd Alley" in the typewriter even now, and if the Beneficent Editor of AMAZING Stories will but smile upon it, you will be reading that bit of action and adventure in a subsequent issue as well.

So don't forget to get your copy of the May issue. Subscription orders should be sent to TSR, Inc., P.O. Box 72089, Chicago IL 60690. Be sure to provide us with your complete name and mailing address, tell us what you want, and include a check or money order in the amount of $9.00 (or $11.00 if you are paying in Canadian funds) for a one-year subscription. Be forewarned that the May issue is mailed out well in advance of that particular month, but if you get your money to us by the end of 1985, that issue will certainly be among the six bi-monthly magazines you will receive.

Gary Gygax