From The
SORCERER'S SCROLL

Role-Playing: *Realism vs.* Game Logic; Spell Points, Vanity Press and Rip-offs

by E. Gary Gygax

Despite the continued success of *D&D,* despite the evergrowing demand for the game, I remain somewhat amazed and very pleased that so many people share a love for the fantastic and heroic with me. It is indeed an unusual honor to have been able to bring so many people so much enjoyment. It tends to make one work harder at other projects so as to make certain the best possible effort is presented. Whatever is done will invariably be compared to *D&D,* and none of us at TSR have any desire to produce a game which falls short of public expectations.

The position of originating the concept of a paper & pencil fantasy role playing game and introducing it to the gaming hobby stands greatly to the credit of TSR. In my mind, it puts us beside the creators of chess (whoever they were), miniature wargames (H.G. Wells), and board wargames (thank you, Avalon Hill!). TSR designed and promoted the whole; it pioneered a concept which is today the most popular form of our hobby. Little did I — or the other members of the Lake Geneva Tactical Studies Association — realize as we fought out fantasy miniatures battles on my sand table that the publication of the rules we used to do so, the "Fantasy Supplement" to *CHAINMAIL (Copyright 1971),* would pioneer a whole new form of game. There are currently some 100,000 *D&D* players, and at the current rate of growth that number could easily double next year. This large audience is highly devoted. Well-wishers are many, and there but few who complain that D&D is not everything they had hoped for in a game.

However, amongst those who play the game avidly there are a vocal few who continually state their opinions as to how and where the game is lacking — and, of course, how *they* have the perfect solution. I do not take issue with any general statement that *D&D* is not flawless; obviously, human imperfection precludes the claim to perfection. I do admit to becoming a trifle irritated at times to read an article in some obscure *D&D* fan magazine or a letter to the editor of some small publication which attacks the game — or claims to be sure to improve D&D if only their new and "improved" rules are followed — with ill-conceived or asinine logic. My irritation is, I hope, only impatience with those who only dimly preceive the actual concepts of the game, and not wounded vanity. Consider what a game is:

Gaming is a form of play. Games are usually for diversion or amusement, although sometimes they are played for a stake (gambling) or prizes. They are typically contests. *Fun* is a synonym for game. To my mind, a game which provides ample fun and enjoyment is good, and if it brings endless hours of amusement and diversion it is proportionately better. This view is held in common with most *D&D* enthusiasts, but there are those vociferous few who seem to find their principal enjoyment in attacking rather than playing the game. The uniform element amongst these individuals is a complete failure to grasp the simple fact that *D&D* is a *game.* Its rules are designed and published so as to assure a balanced and cohesive whole. Each segment has been considered and developed so as to fit with the other parts. Each part, meshing with the others, provides an amusing diversion, a game which is fun to play and set so as to provide maximum enjoyment for as long a period of time as possible. Each separate part must be viewed as some-

thing which contributes to the whole. Pulling this or that section from the body and criticizing it is totally invalid unless the workings of that particular segment do not harmonize with the whole, thus causing the entire game to be unenjoyable. That the vast majority of players agree with this view is evident. There are very few who attempt to insert dissimilar rules into a system which was carefully designed to work on precepts totally at odds with what the would-be designer views as crucial to making *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS* a "good" game.

D&D encourages inventiveness and originality within the framework of its rules. Those who insist on altering the framework should design their own game. Who can say that such an effort might not produce a product superior to *D&D?* Certainly not I.

Interestingly, most of the variant systems which purport to "improve" the game are presented under the banner of *realism.* I have personally come to suspect that this banner is the refuge of scoundrels; whether the last or first refuge is immaterial. "Realism" has become a bugaboo in the hobby, and all too many of the publishers — TSR included — make offerings to this god too frequently. The very definition of a game gives the lie to this false diety. *Real* implies being true to life, not artificial and related to actuality. A game is real, but its subject matter can, at most, give only a "sense" of what actually took place or exists. Paper maps, cardboard counters, plastic markers, or toy tanks and soldiers are not and never will be the stuff of historical reality. There, real bullets kill and maim actual people. Men, women, and children suffer and die, millions of dollars are spent and destroyed, all for the glory of war. Therefore, those who desire realism in wargames, or simulations of social or political events, or racing, or anything else used as subject material for a game should go and do the actual thing —join the military, enter politics, become a race car driver, and so on. At best a game can give a reflection of reality, and then only if its rules reflect historical actualities and logically proceed from truth and facts.

When fantasy games are criticized for being "unrealistic" — and by fantasy I certainly mean both imaginary "science fiction" games and heroic fantasy — the sheer magnitude of the misconception absolutely astounds me! How can the critic presume that his or her imagined projection of a non-existent world or conjectured future history is any more "real" than another's? While science fantasy does have some facts and good theories to logically proceed from, so that a semblance of truth can be claimed for those works which attempt to ground themselves on the basis of reality for their future projections, the world of "never-was" has no such shelter. Therefore, the absurdity of a cry for "realism" in a pure fantasy game seems so evident that I am overwhelmed when such confronts me. Yet, there are those persistent few who keep demanding it. The "camel" of working magic, countless pantheons of gods and devils, monsters that turn people to stone or breath fire, and characters that are daily faced with Herculean challenges which they overcome by dint of swordplay and spell casting is gulped down without a qualm. It is the "gnat" of "unrealistic" combat, or "unrealistic" magic systems, or the particular abilities of a class of characters in the game which makes them gag. This becomes hard to cope with, because I am basically a realist.

In a pure fantasy game, one based on myth, mythos, and its own unique make-believe, realism (as a reflection of the actual) and logic can not be defined in terms conventional to other game forms. Realism in such a game can only be judged by the participants acceptance of the fantasy milieu invoked by the game. If this make-believe world is widely and readily accepted, if players fully agree to suspend their disbelief when playing it, the game has reality for them. Involvement and enjoyment indicate acceptance of a *game reality,* and the game becomes realistic thereby. *Game logic* in such a fantasy can only follow the basic tenets of the game, logical or illogical. If the basic precepts of the fantasy follow the *imprimus,* it has its own logic. Just as the fantasy must be accepted to achieve the game reality, so must the underlying principle of the game system be understood to follow its logic.

D&D is a make-believe game. It is designed, however, to facilitate close personal involvement in all aspects of play; this makes suspension of disbelief easier for those who can initially accept a game form which does not relate to any reality except a few tenuous areas, *'viz.* actual kinds of weapons from the medieval period are generally named, as are actual types of armor, and the social order of medieval Europe (and occasionally the Middle East and elsewhere in the world) is mentioned as bases for the game, to state the most obvious factual sources for

D&D. It is a game for the imaginative and fanciful, and perhaps for those who dream of adventure and derring-do in a world all too mundane. As a game must first and foremost be fun, it needs no claim to "realism" to justify its existence. *D&D* exists as a game because thousands of people enjoy playing it. As its rules were specifically designed to make it fun and enjoyable, and the consensus of opinion is that *D&D* is so, does it need to have logical justification of any or all of its rules? Because logic does not necessarily create an enjoyable game form, the reply must be generally negative. Logic, even game logic, must be transcended in the interest of the overall game. If an illogical or inconsistent part fits with the others to form a superior whole, then its very illogicalness and inconsistence are logical and consistent within the framework of the game, for the rules exist for the play of the game, although all too often it seems that the game is designed for the use of the rules in many of today's products. When questioned about the whys and wherefores of *D&D* I sometimes rationalize the matter and give "realistic" and "logical" reasons. The truth of the matter is that *D&D* was written principally as a game — perhaps I used game realism and game logic consciously or unconsciously when I did so, but that is begging the question. Enjoyment is the real reason for *D&D* being created, written, and published.

With the popularity of *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS* increasing so dramatically, I fervently desire to put the matter of variants, particularly "realistic" variants, to rest once and for all, so as to get on to other more important things, but it keeps springing up every time a sound stroke is dealt to it. Additions to and augmentations of certain parts of the *D&D* rules are fine. Variants which change the rules so as to imbalance the game or change it are most certainly not. These sorts of tinkering fall into the realm of creation of a new game, not development of the existing system, and as I stated earlier, those who wish to make those kind of changes should go and design their own game. In order to make this clear, a few examples of destructive variants are given below.

Why can't magic-users employ swords? And for that matter, why not allow fighters to use wands and similar magical devices? On the surface this seems a small concession, but in actuality it would spoil the game! Each character role has been designed with care in order to provide varied and unique approaches to solving the problems which confront the players. If characters are not kept distinct, they will soon merge into one super-character. Not only would this destroy the variety of the game, but it would also kill the game, for the super-character would soon have nothing left to challenge him or her, and the players would grow bored and move on to something which was fun. This same reasoning precludes many of the proposed character classes which enthusiasts wish to add to *D&D*. Usually such classes are either an unnecessary variation on an existing class, are to obtuse to be interesting, or are endowed with sufficient prowess to assure that they would rule the campaign for whomever chose to play as such (most certainly their authors). Similarly, multi-classed character types such as elves and dwarves are limited in most class progressions in order to assure game balance. That this can be justified by game logic, pointing out that humankind triumphs and rules other life forms in most if not all myths and mythos is a pleasant superfluity.

Combat is the most frequently abused area, for here many would-be game inventors feel they have sufficient expertise to design a better system. Perhaps someone will eventually do so, but the examples to date are somewhat less than inspiring of confidence. The "critical hit" or "double damage" on a "to hit" die roll of 20 is particularly offensive to the precepts of D&D as well. Two reciprocal rules which go with such a system are seldom, if ever mentioned: 1) opponents scoring a natural 20 will likewise cause a double damage hit or critical hit upon player characters; and 2) as a 20 indicated a perfect hit, a 1 must indicate a perfect miss, so at any time a 1 is rolled on the "to hit" die, the attacker must roll to find if he or she has broken his or her weapon, dropped it, or missed so badly as to strike an ally nearby. When these additions are suggested, the matter is usually dropped, but the point must be made that whole game system is perverted, and the game possibly ruined, by the inclusion of "instant death" rules, be they aimed at monsters or characters. In the former case they imbalance the play and move the challenge which has been carefully placed into *D&D*. In the latter, "instant death" no longer allows participants to use judgement when playing. Certainly some monsters are capable of delivering death

at a single stroke, but players know these monsters and can take precautions. If everything that is faced has an excellent chance to kill characters, they will surely die before long. Then the game loses its continuity and appeal, for lasting character identification cannot be developed.

There are a number of foolish misconceptions which tend to periodically crop up also. *Weapons expertise* is one. Given the basic assumption that those normally employing weapons are typical of the medieval period, and *D&D* is plainly stated as a medieval fantasy game, it should follow in the minds of knowledgeable players that any fighting man worth the name made it a point to practice daily with all forms of arms. There was a prejudice against the use of the bow by knights, granted. This is of no consequence in game terms. Any particular preference as to weapon type by a fighter most assuredly was not indicative of any lack of ability with another one. More to the point, however, *D&D* presumes that the adventurers are the elite, the cream of the cream. Each is a potential Hero, Archmage, and so on. Certainly each is also capable of employing a simple hand weapon to effect, and correctly utilizing any such weapon. The truth of the matter with respect to weapon expertise is, I believe, another attempt to move players closer to the "instant death" ability. For those who insist on giving weapons expertise bonuses due to the supposed extra training and ability of the character, I reply: What character could be more familiar and expert with a chosen weapon type than are monsters born and bred to their fangs, claws, hooves, horns, and other body weaponry? Therefore, the monsters must likewise receive weapons expertise bonuses. While this does put part of the system into balance again, it moves player characters closer to situations where they can be killed before they can opt to follow a course of action aimed at extricating themselves. Again, this feature is undesirable and must be discarded.

In general, the enjoyment of *D&D* is the fantasy: identification with a supernormal character, the challenges presented to this character as he or she seeks to gain gold and glory (experience levels and magical items), the images conjured up in participants' minds as they explore weird labyrinths underground and foresaken wildernesses above, and of course the satisfaction of *defeating* opponents and gaining some fabulous treasure. This is the stuff of which *D&D* is made. Protracted combat situations which stress "realism" will destroy the popularity of the game as surely as would the inclusion of creatures which will always slay any characters they fight. The players desire *action,* but all but the odd few will readily tell you that endless die rolling to determine where a hit lands, having to specify what sort of attack is being made, how their character will defend against an attack, and so on are the opposite of action; they are tedious. Furthermore, such systems are totally extraneous to the *D&D* system. Although they might not ruin the game for a particular group of players, general inclusion in the published rules would certainly turn off the majority of enthusiasts. It would turn me to other pursuits, for if I was interested in that sort of game I would be playing a simulation of something historical, not a fantasy game.

Spell point systems are also currently in vogue amongst the fringe group which haunt the pages of "Amateur Press Association" publications. Now APAs are generally beneath contempt, for they typify the lowest form of vanity press. There one finds pages and pages of banal chatter and inept writing from persons incapable of creating anything which is publishable elsewhere. Therefore, they pay money to tout their sophomoric ideas, criticise those who *are* able to write and design, and generally make themselves obnoxious. * While there are notable exceptions, they are far too few to give any merit to the vehicles they appear in. From this morass rose the notion that a spell point system should be inserted into *D&D.* Strangely enough, "realism" was used as one of the principal reasons for use of spell points. These mutterings are not as widespread as the few proponents of such a system imagine. The *D&D* magic system is drawn directly from *CHAINMAIL.* It, in turn, was inspired by the superb writing of Jack Vance. This "Vancian" magic system works splendidly in the game. If it has any fault, it is towards making characters who are magic-users too powerful. This sort of fault is better corrected within the existing framework of the game — by requiring more time to cast spells, by making magic-users progress more slowly in experience levels. Spell points add nothing to *D&D* except more complication, more record keeping, more wasted time, and a precept which is totally foreign to the rest of the game.

Sorceror's Scroll *cont. from page 16*

There are numerous additions and supplemental pieces which are neither detrimental nor particularly useful to the game. If players find them enjoyable, there is certainly no reason why their particular group cannot include such material in their particular campaign. The important factor is the integrity of the game as a whole. The use of *social* level (as originally conceived by Game Designers Workshop and appearing in *EN GARDE)* is a good case in point. In the overall scheme of the game, social level is unimportant to a band of adventurers going out to slay monsters and gain treasure. However, in a campaign it can be used as scenario background — or not used — as the referee and his or her players see fit. Basically, social level means nothing to adventurers such as Conan, Fafhrd and Gray Mouser, Elric, Kugel the Clever, etc. Yet in a game, it can be a handy referee's tool for setting a stage or rewarding player characters. It does not pervert the intent of the game, it does not destroy game systems. It can be readily included, or ignored, without effect upon the whole.

Certain small publishers of amateur magazines or second-rate work have accused TSR of maintaining a proprietary interest in *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS* from a purely mercenary motivation. This is usually because they have fervent desire to trade on *D&D's* repute and make a reputation or quick buck on its merits rather than their own. Oddly enough, some individuals also fault TSR for being careful to protect its trade marks and copyrights and reputation, blandly faulting a desire to profit from our labors. *D&D* is inseparable from TSR. The repute of the game and of the company are high because we honestly strive to give buyers real value for their money. TSR's customers, the buyers of *D&D, etal* are satisfied and then some, for what they have purchased has provided them with hours of enjoyment, and will continue to do so for many more gaming hours. Just as we must prevent the ignorant and inept from spoiling the game by tinkering with the integral systems, we also take every possible step to prevent exploitation of *D&D* enthusiasts by publishers who hide shoddy products under a fantasy role playing guise. We cannot stop them from putting worthless material into print, but we can certainly make it clear that it is neither recommended nor approved for use with *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS.* As long as these worthless goods do not trade on the good name of *D&D,* we can only tell our readers that they should beware of the products they purchase, so read before you buy!

To some extent, this same exploitation continually takes place in fantasy gaming oriented publications. Many seek to trade on *D&D's* popularity by offering "new" or "variant" systems which fit only with *D&D,* even though the game is not actually named. Buy them if you have money to throw away, but at peril of your campaign; do not use material which alters the basic precepts of the game.

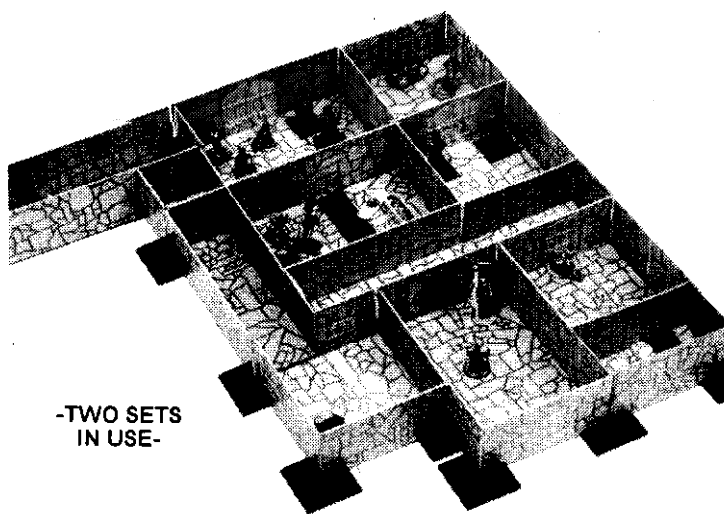Commerce is neither immoral nor unethical. It is part and parcel of our world. Workers are paid for their services, just as authors and publishers receive financial gain for what they provide. The same individual has a family which depends upon commerce to support itself (and possibly the individual if he or she is a student). The individual does, or will one day, work to earn his or her own living. But our interest in *D&D* extends beyond money and even beyond reputation. TSR created the whole of fantasy role playing gaming as a hobby, and we are proud of this achievement. Pride is what we have accomplished gives us a paternal right to protect our creation. Be glad, for it will help to assure that your game remains a good one, and that when you see *"D&D"* on a product you will have reasonable expectations with respect to its quality. Use your imagination and creativity when you play *D&D,* for there is much room within its parameters for individuality and personalization; always keep in mind that everything in the game is there for a reason, that major systems are carefully geared and balanced to mesh together to make a workable whole. Changing one part could well ruin the rest, and then what would you play?

*Editor's Note: In recent months, I have been the target of some pretty vicious and petty attacks from some of the "APA's". Much to the attackers' collective dismay, I am still alive and well. I've never made any bones about my feelings toward the field: they are unprofessional, unethical and seemingly ignorant of the laws concerning libel. Most of the so-called "authors" seem to live in some sort of fantasy world, totally unconnected with the realities of everyday life. A good many of them are incapable of even quoting correctly.

When apprised of error or inaccuracy, their usual response is an outburst of paranoia and persecution complexes. As the author mentions, there are a scant few exceptions in the field. A few have written material for this magazine in the past. Hopefully, a few will continue to do so. There is one who once wrote for *TD* who will *never* be asked to again, after he grossly misquoted something I said at Origins last year.

When I first got into this business, I felt that the APA-zines might be good for the hobby. I even reviewed a number of them for *TD* readers. Now I know the error of my thinking. They serve no useful purpose.