

TWO CENTS

Views on "Role" playing

by Christopher Gandy

This issue's Two Cents column deviates a bit from the norm. At GEN CON® XVI Game Fair, many members asked me why there were so few articles written by members in POLYHEDRON™ Newszine. My answer was that I received so few, period. This article is obviously an exception.

Further, I had noticed a trend during my own role playing experiences — many (but by no means all) role-playing gamers don't really "role" play their characters — and had considered writing an article about it; I received Christopher Gandy's manuscript during the middle of my meditations on this subject and decided to wait for the appropriate opportunity to print it. Exposure to great hoards of "role"-playing gamers at GEN CON XVI Game Fair brought the subject to mind again, as well as the "Why aren't there more member-written articles published" question, so here it is.

When indoctrinating new players into the AD&D™ game system, it becomes immediately obvious that if one tries to get the newcomer to assimilate all the rules and their nuances at once, boredom and displeasure may rob one of another potential player. A solution to this is to have new players create and outfit a character and play the game with a "pick-up-the-rules-as-you-go-along" approach. This "trial by fire" introduction will usually capture the neophyte's interest (particularly if the first game is an exceptionally good playing session) as he or she readily identifies with the new persona.

A good DM should limit the amount of "coaching" new players receive from the veterans to encourage them to think and act for themselves. The inevitable "What should I do now?" should be met with "Whatever you want" or a variation thereof, furthering the development of the player/persona identification. A new role-playing gamer is welcomed to the fold.

Or is this truly the case? Has the gamer been introduced to role playing, or merely encountered a new set of circumstances and parameters to live within? Oftentimes what happens is that the misfortunate (but highly probable) demise of this new *persona* is followed by the creation of a new character who, again unfortunately, turns out to be the reincarnation of the first *persona*. In other words, the body (characteristics, race and even class) is transient but the personality is static — that of the player.

Although this player will soon learn all the game's rules and may ultimately advance a character to levels of greatness, the player is still a level 1 "role" player. A vast amount of potential enjoyment has been overlooked. Role-playing games are designed to be just that — games which allow the little bit of "ham" in each of us to step out onto the stage as someone else and take a bow. An actor does not set out to show how he, as a *person*, would react to the plot of the drama, but to interpret and relay the reactions of the *persona* whose *role* he is playing.

The desirability of players establishing character personas distinctive from their own personalities is by no means an insignificant point in establishing a successful "role"-playing game campaign. Confusing characters with their players of similar, or even dissimilar, personalities can affect both the quality of play and interpersonal relations between the members of a campaign. If players put themselves into the game situation rather than into a *personas*, feelings can get hurt. There is a great danger of players taking to heart undesirable deeds enacted upon their characters. Complaints from players that their characters are not being treated fairly (or worse) by other players are sure signs that the players have not separated themselves from their characters. A gaming session that ends with *players* mad at one another for what their *characters* have done (especially if done within the possible realm of a charac-

ter's personality, i.e. a well-played Chaotic character) is also symptomatic of a problem to watch for and overcome.

No game referee really wants to impose a personality upon a player character in his or her campaign, but there are ways to encourage better role-playing and separation of the player personality from the character personality. The "monkey-see, monkey-do" approach may be the simplest method. As DM, pay special attention to the NPCs in your campaign; do you use the same voice when role-playing each of your NPCs?; do each of your NPCs react the same way to similar situations? Give them distinctive personalities. Idiosyncrasies can be a real shot in the arm for a game lacking "role" playing.

Another approach may be to show your players the "classic" personas found in the back of the Rogues Gallery playing aid. These examples of the way the experts "meant" these characters to be role played may be enough to spark the creativity of the players in the right direction.

Next time you or your players roll up a set of characteristics, don't think like an actor would his wardrobe and portray someone new, someone unique, someone else. Don't just play at a role-playing game, *role* play during the game. You might just meet a lot of new friends you didn't know you had in you! 🎲

TWO CENTS

by Joseph Wichman

I have read the "Two Cents" column in POLYHEDRON™ Newszine #14, and feel that I must comment. Although the column is well written and its arguments have some merit, I disagree with the basic premise concerning "role playing." I played in a campaign where the Dungeon Master enforced what he called "role playing," and I was quickly disillusioned. It was no fun having the Dungeon Master tell the players how their characters should act based on the Dungeon Master's view of the character's "personality." On the other hand, too many times have I heard the player's excuse, "But that's what my character would do in that situation." After the third time a character foolishly causes the death of others in the party, or after the first time a character assassinates another, one or more players may be lost to the delightful world of role playing.

An actor in a play spends months of concentration and rehearsal to perfect a character that he must play for a couple of hours (and in a play the dialogue and actions are scripted). Role-playing gamers cannot be expected to do this, and the analogy, although commonly used and usually accepted, is fallacious. A player should use his characters to express aspects of his personality that are difficult to express in his everyday life. The AD&D® game gives people the chance to be a barbarian of immense strength and few words, another the chance to be very pious, even fanatical, in the worship of a fantasy deity. In fact, it gives a person the chance to be both characters if he so chooses. The important point is that these are not, and cannot, be personalities totally divorced from the real personality of the player. They are, instead, free expressions of aspects of a person's self. The wonder of the game is that it gives free reign to the players' fantasies. It is a game to enjoy, and each character is a carefully nurtured portion of his player's personality and fantasy life.

The AD&D game (or any game, for

that matter) should be a game of cooperation. If a character refuses to cooperate with his fellows, it is the player who is refusing to cooperate. If a thief character steals a cherished or important item from a companion, he deserves to be ostracized by the other characters. And if a player's characters continually behave in such a non-cooperative manner, then the players should ostracize the player in question. In the same way, if a player character assassinates another player's cherished character to gain a few experience points, the player of the dead character should not be expected to accept that as part of the game. Players should at all times be encouraged to express different aspects of their personalities; i.e., to role play. But do not expect them to abandon their true selves for a game.

Another aspect of this subject is the knowledge of characters. The Dungeon Master in the role-playing campaign I mentioned above, insisted that our characters, who had presumably lived for twenty or more years, knew nothing that we did not learn during play; they did not know what deities were worshipped; they did not know anything about the flora and fauna of the world; they did not even know the way to the nearest town. I am aware that many Dungeon Masters impose a less stringent form of this rule. This is all well and good, but before enforcing such a rule in a campaign, the Dungeon Master should consider this: six hours of play a week for two or three years can hardly match the experiences and learning of a lifetime (even a lifetime in a medieval society). In my group I allow the characters to know what the players can remember at the game table (the only references allowed are the *Players Handbook* and any notes previously made by the player of the character being played). This works very well for us, because as often as not, the players' memories are faulty or incomplete. They are still frequently surprised and confounded by events and monsters. Of course, our group has been playing only three years, and most of the players avoid intense

perusal of the other reference works. This method might not work as well with players who have memorized the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, *Monster Manual I*, *Fiend Folio*, *Deities and Demigods*, and *Monster Manual II*.

I often throw in new monsters and magic items, and alter existing ones, to keep the players from getting complacent. In addition, I do not hesitate to forbid some knowledge or actions. The more rare a monster is, the more likely I am to rule that a character would not have accurate information concerning that particular monster. Example: medium-level player characters could not have perfectly accurate knowledge of all of a demon's or devil's powers. They're lucky if they recognize one, much less know its specific attributes. They might easily know, however, that devils radiate fear. They might also know, from the same rumor-monger, that devils can be held at bay with any holy symbol ("Well, I *thought* that would work!"). The important point is that the Dungeon Master and players should cooperate as a group to create an immensely good time. Our game is great fun and a learning experience; but above all it can be an enduring and rewarding basis for social interaction and important interpersonal relations.

I'd like to address one more aspect of role-playing, and that is the playing of evil characters. I find this distasteful in the extreme, and feel that it lends ammunition to the enemies of role-playing games. The Dungeon Master must, with discretion, play the parts of many evil beings. However, these beings exist as foils to the player characters, and are meant to be destroyed or defeated. The task of destroying these evil beings should not be an easy one. It should be extremely difficult, challenging, and dangerous. But if the characters are champions of good vs. evil (or natural vs. unnatural), and are intelligent, cunning, strong, and somewhat lucky, they should have a fair chance to triumph. If they fail, it should be in pursuit of lofty goals, not base and vile ends.



TWO CENTS

by Christopher Gandy

The following is a response to Joseph Wichmann's Two Cents article in issue #18.

In reading Mr. Wichmann's response to my previous article, I was dismayed to find that the main thrust of my argument had been misunderstood. Apparently, the fact that I was suggesting a way to increase enjoyment uniquely available in role-playing games was obscured by some points with which Mr. Wichmann disagreed. I would like to take this opportunity to clarify several of these misconceptions.

By saying that only schizophrenics change their personality and then without control is to overlook the fact that most of us wear many different "faces" during the course of the day. Many of us have had to put on our best face during business meetings, job interviews, or dates. While these are roles that differ only minutely from the norm, it is not unreasonable to extrapolate from this that diversified "role" playing is a distinct possibility. If one can be a little different, one can be quite different.

To question the actor analogy because an actor spends months of time to perfect a character and a role-playing gamer doesn't have that time is to overlook some pertinent information. Although no gamer would want to spend months preparing for his first adventure (though a DM would in preparing his world), many spend years developing that character as he survives and gains experience. Assuming that the persona is not stagnant, a player may put in more time refining the personality of his/her favorite character than any actor. The initial framework of personality can be built "off-the-cuff" much as an actor does improvisations.

I agree wholeheartedly that the AD&D® game, as well as any non-solitaire game, is to be enjoyed, and is a game of cooperation. The gamers must cooperate in order to have fun, but to say that the characters MUST cooperate is an unwarranted leap of logic. Cooperation and competition are not mutually exclusive. In any competitive game the players must cooperate on the rules, etc. Regardless of whether it is another player character or one of the DM's many minions that is the adversary of the moment, the willing suspension of disbelief necessary for effective fantasy allows gamers to see this lack of persona cooperation as separate and

distinct from player cooperation. Although I agree with the statement that if a thief character preys upon his fellows, [then] the characters should ostracize the thief, I disagree fundamentally that the players should ostracize the character's player. Perhaps the answer is to persuade the player to play the role of a cooperative character by pointing out its advantages to all.

The knowledge a character has is indeed a sticky area of the role a gamer has to play. A medieval society was very "home" based. Very few knew much of the "outside" world, and fewer still were educated any more about the flora and fauna than what hazards to avoid in the immediate vicinity. The reason knowledge often becomes a problem is the overlap of a player's knowledge from character to character. I once DMed a player whose character perished in the group's first foray into a dungeon. When the group made its second assault (complete with a new character for the player in question) the new character whizzed through corridors he had never been in before just as if he knew them like the back of his hand. Granted, this abuse of knowledge might not be exercised by better players (those playing their roles correctly), but even subconsciously this can cause DMs' dismay. This is another reason why "role" playing should be emphasized. The use of new or different monsters and magic items helps diminish the problem, but "role" playing could eliminate it entirely.

The playing of evil characters is a matter of personal preference. The narrow-mindedness of the hobby's detractors is not sufficient reason to outlaw the playing of "darker" characters. The wise gamer, however, will temper his fervor when around the uninformed. I agree that it can be trying for DMs and players who prefer good aligned adventures to accommodate evil PCs, but that is part of the game system. Indeed, some worthwhile work has been done toward making running an evil party easier. The module, *The Garden of Nefaron*, published in DRAGON® Magazine #53 is one example of this. No one can deny the temptation to tread on the "dark side," and as this is only fantasy, what better place to get rid of these emotions? Many of us have thought that we could devise the perfect crime if it weren't against the law. Imagining isn't against the law, so why not try it in imaginary terms? As cadets at the United States Military Academy at West

Point, we lived by an Honor Code that stated we would not "lie, cheat, steal, nor tolerate those that do." The AD&D® game is very popular at The Point — where else can you do all those things and not be expelled? And, of course, the DM always showed that the "good" life was more profitable.

Lest the readers of POLYHEDRON™ Newszine think that I believe Mr. Wichmann's opinion is worthless, let me point out that, although overshadowed, he did identify what I meant to be the primary point in my article. He stressed that role playing should be "expressions of aspects of a person's self," and I agree. The closing line of my "Two Cents" tried to sum that up by stating, "You might just meet a lot of new friends you didn't know you had *in you*" (stress added). To ask an average high school student to role play an 18 intelligence genius is a bit ridiculous. If he or she had "genius" intelligence, he or she would be using it daily. Even the actor discussed earlier can only put *himself* into the role and use his experiences to portray a persona as he believes that character would react.

I also support Mr. Wichmann's disdain for DMs who heavy-handedly force a set of actions upon a person because of how he (the DM) feels the character would perform. Indeed I cited two examples of "ways to encourage better role playing and separation of the player personality from the character personality" (stress added). If a player does not wish to "role" play, so be it. It is that player who is missing the enjoyable experience available only in role-playing games. For those who prefer to say "My character haggles with the merchant for the lowest possible price" rather than playing out the interaction, the game can still be fun, but it's like a cake without icing . . . the best part is missing.

I would like to close on a note that I wish we could permanently establish as the foundation for all gamers. As Mr. Wichmann so astutely states: "Our game IS great fun AND a learning experience; but ABOVE ALL it can be an enduring and rewarding basis for social interaction and interpersonal relations" (stress added). As it has been said before, the game's the thing, and the players make it happen. When the game and the people cease to be interesting and fun, I will hang up my dice and lead castings for *Tic-Tac-Toe*. May the sun never set on role-playing games.

