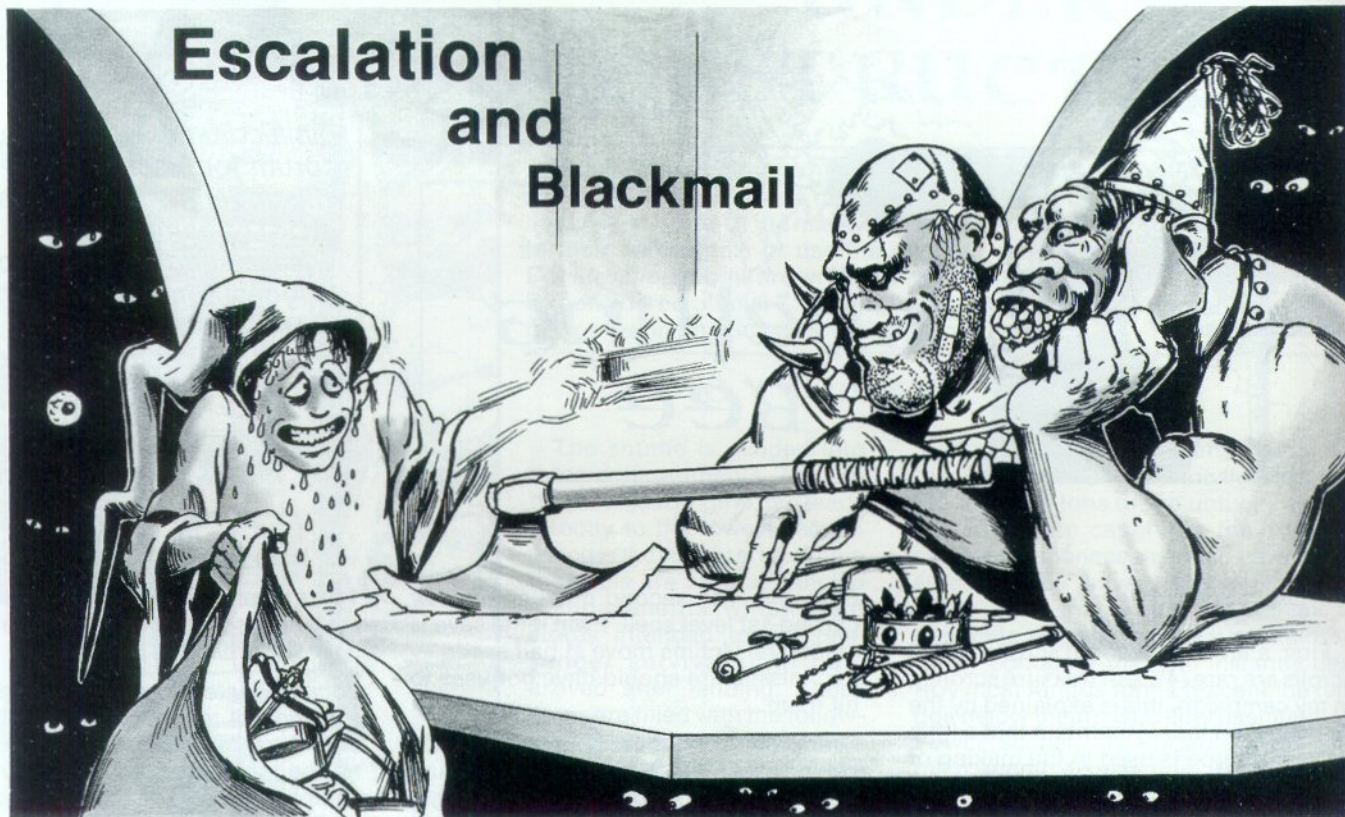


# Escalation and Blackmail



by Gary Gygax

There are many problems attendant upon the creation and maintenance of any role playing game, but it seems as if fantasy brings out the worst (and best, of course) in gamemasters and players alike, for the imaginative nature of the subject matter encourages creativity and free thinking. The Learned Mr. Eastland informs me that the areas most frequently mentioned by Network Members are those which appear in the title of this article. Without further ado, then, let us address these very problems.

Who does not know about my stand on the "Monte Haul" game? I have derided this sort of play and warned of the natural consequences for years now. The principle is simple: although the game systems offered are generally broad and open-ended, the bases upon which they are constructed are finite in scope. AD&D™ game rules postulate commencement at 1st level of professional skill and gradual progression to limits not in excess of about 20th level. The systems built into the rules are designed to make progress slow and difficult. If these are followed strictly, it should take several years of play to bring a character to the upper limits. At such juncture, virtual "retirement" — typically in conjunction with the DM, so that the "retired" PC

can be used as a "power" in the campaign milieu by the DM — is mandatory. Other characters, whether brand new ones or former henchmen of the "retired personage," are then brought into regular play with the same goal in mind. Given the number of races and professions, this should provide no less than a solid decade of regular adventuring before any player has "retired" characters in all areas, from clerical to illusionist, dwarf to half-orc.

It is possible for a clever and highly inventive DM to allow faster progression and higher levels, but this assumes many things, the least of which are tougher monsters. NPC's must be of proportionate (or greater) ability, magic of all sorts must be upgraded, and the whole made to mesh with the base rules. Obviously, this doesn't occur with any regularity, or else this article wouldn't be needed! The usual case is that DM's allow rapid, unearned rise in professional skill. Players in such campaigns brag fatuously about their umpteenth level paladin/assassins with invulnerable armor and swords of unfailing sextuple damage. Magic-Users employ spells which demolish worlds — after all, they've slain every deity many levels earlier! Who can keep up with such

stuff? Nobody to my knowledge. Such campaigns disintegrate under the crushing weight of ennui, with the umpteenth level players wandering off to greener pastures out of sheer boredom. Naturally, these former players cannot actually play the game, so their interest can't be rekindled by a well-run campaign — low-level characters are for beginners . . . (Besides, one or two outings in a real campaign quickly shows them up for bad players who rely on level and equipment rather than playing skill.)

The answer to escalation in any AD&D game campaign is simple: follow the rules and it won't happen. If each and every DM played the monsters encountered as if they were his or her own player characters, most of the easy expeditions would be over. Groups of organized kobolds with nothing more than a few copper pieces in treasure would provide an object lesson to casual participants looking for unearned wealth.

Truth to tell, I have lost a character or two to such lowly foes. Such proper beginnings would also put an end to the foolish inquiries about what to do after some PC killed Tiamat and desired to know the exact nature of her treasure. When asked how many abshai devils were fought, how many



dragon consorts were there, how many other devils overcome, the blank stare told the whole story. Another Monte Haul DM giving both monsters and treasures away is neither unique nor exciting. This is not to say that a few superior DM's have not managed to conduct reasonable campaigns wherein PC's of 20th level and above were active, for I do know of several. The real question returns to the need for such levels. They are not needed, for restraint of the level of play to that given in the rules is far easier to manage, and assures that the participants get to explore the game in all of its facets by playing various characters of differing race and profession.

The foregoing does not apply to the D&D® game system. It is, in fact, designed to move player characters upwards more rapidly. 30th level is not unthinkable — it is actually not remarkable. The problem is, however, we (TSR) have been remiss in providing the necessary material beyond low to intermediate level play. D&D® game players have, understandably, then grafted the AD&D™ game system into their campaign and sought to use it as the vehicle for continued expansion of play. The desire is logical. The device is not. To correct this unfortunate situation, we are now hard at work revising and reformating both the Basic and Expert sets of the D&D game to prepare the way for final release of the next two portions of the game. The revised sets will be available in mid-1983. The D&D® Companion Set should be ready by early 1984. It will provide for play through the 24th level or thereabouts. The fourth set will continue play through at least 36th level of play and deal with quasi-deity status and development of PC "worlds." It is projected that this should be ready about six months after the third set, so a GEN CON® 1984 Game Convention release is not impossible. Along with these additions will come a revised and expanded GODS, DEMI-GODS & HEROES™ book and a complete fantasy world setting for the D&D® game. Frank Mentzer is in charge of this massive effort, with Francois Marcela-Froideval and several others assisting. My personal apologies to all of you who eagerly await the completion. The undertaking has been scheduled for several years, but until recently we did not have the manpower to undertake it while continuing to produce regular work.

To sum up the problem of escalation, it occurs when the DM allows too rapid a rise in levels for the game basis at hand. The problem is typically compounded by a "Monte Haul" attitude — after all, the immediate

gratitude of the players is gratifying indeed. Viability of the campaign is virtually eliminated for short-term accolades. To keep participants, the DM must attempt to create ever-tougher monsters guarding ever-greater treasures. Because such monsters are created only to be slain, and because the more powerful magic and richer loot are always awarded, the cycle must be repeated, until the imagination of the DM fails or players tire of reaping unearned rewards. Use of the AD&D™ game in such a campaign is certain to bring it to a close very quickly. Even when the complete D&D game system is available, a "give it away" approach will doom the campaign to be short-lived indeed. Complete familiarity with the underlying principles of the game, as well as thorough rules knowledge and superior DMing, are key elements to campaign longevity and a sure end to the spiral of escalation in too many campaigns.

This brings us around to the topic of blackmail. Some Gentle Readers will be surprised to learn that threats are actually a part of some campaigns. Blackmail in reality is a crime punishable by law. In the game setting there are no such laws, but... The problem, as I understand it, is that too many DM's find themselves coerced or forced into allowing players to get away with certain things by dint of blackmail. If a PC isn't allowed to live, do some postscripted act etc., the player or group will retaliate by 1) taking vengeance upon the DM's PC in their game, or 2) no longer play in the DM's campaign. That is pretty low.

As a DM, I have never been daunted by any implication of retaliation or actual threat to any of my player characters in another campaign. Who indeed would wish to play in a campaign run by so shallow a person as one who would resort to measures of that sort? Not I. I have, therefore, never lost a character due to "revenge." I am careful with whom I participate in any campaign, particularly with respect to the DM. If any DM values a PC more than their personal integrity, they should give up gaming until their personality is sufficiently developed to cope with such problems.

Let us leave that and go on to the second area; "I'll take my marbles and go home" ploy. To say that such a threat is childish is putting it mildly. The DM who allows blackmail of this sort to affect his or her judgement must take a hard look at himself or herself in this light. If the threat is childish, what then the person who actually reacts to it?! Certainly the enjoyment of playing FRP games is

undeniable, but at what cost? If it is true that the only players a DM can get for a game are of the level where blackmail is common, who needs such association, even if it means temporarily giving up the game? Hopefully none of the honest participants would resort to crime in order to obtain sufficient funds to purchase game products.

Similarly, why should such good enthusiasts consort with blackmailers in pursuit of the hobby? Better to set the whole thing aside for the time necessary to find sincere fellow gamers interested in true playing enjoyment. If it takes months, what is that cost weighed against the true joy of sharing with others of like mind and integrity?

The answer is easy: tell any blackmailer that you will allow one such threat to pass as a jest, but a second will bring retribution swift and sure. Most blackmailers are weak or cowardly. A firm reply could well demonstrate that childish peak will gain nothing, and basically honest types will give over the idea and proceed with integrity. With luck, the actual blackmailers — those set on the course of having their way regardless — will quit then and there. This will remove the bad example and counter with the good example of your integrity as a DM.

Consider this also: where and when does blackmail end? Never, of course, until the blackmailer has drained everything he or she wants. In the case of a game, that means a short time indeed. The initial portion of this article covered escalation. Compound that with disrespect for a DM. Who can respect a DM who gives in to blackmail? Who can trust his or her ability and integrity? Who can feel a sense of real accomplishment for success in a game of the sort DM'ed by such an individual? One single incident of giving in to blackmail and the integrity of the campaign is doomed. It will not last long. Its members will never be respected by themselves or others.

If some player actually dares to openly threaten you as DM, then the options are clear. You must reject the threat, punish the character, and remove the players from the campaign — permanently or until such time as an open apology and renunciation of blackmail is made. If you are threatened as a player by blackmail, the reaction must be as immediate and as strong, with whatever measures are open to you in the circumstances. If this means leaving a campaign, so be it. A new and better one can be found.

So much for sermons. May the dice be with you! 