

The Dungeons & Dragons Magic System

by Gary Gygax

Because there are many legendary and authored systems of magic, many questions about the system of magic used in *D & D* are continually raised. Magic in *CHAINMAIL* was fairly brief, and because it was limited to the concept of table top miniatures battles, there was no problem in devising and handling this new and very potent factor in the game. The same cannot be said of *D & D*. While miniatures battles on the table top were conceived as a part of the overall game system, the major factor was always envisioned as the underworld adventure, while the wilderness trek assumed a secondary role, various other aspects took a third place, and only then were miniatures battles considered. So a somewhat different concept of magic had to be devised to employ with the *D & D* campaign in order to make it all work.

The four cardinal types of magic are those systems which require long conjuration with much paraphernalia as an adjunct (as used by Shakespeare in *MACBETH* or as typically written about by Robert E. Howard in his "Conan" yarns), the relatively short spoken spell (as in Finnish mythology or as found in the superb fantasy of Jack Vance), ultra-powerful (if not always correct) magic (typical of deCamp & Pratt in their classic "Harold Shea" stories), and the generally weak and relatively ineffectual magic (as found in J.R.R. Tolkien's work). Now the use of magic in the game was one of the most appealing aspects, and given the game system it was fairly obvious that its employment could not be on the complicated and time consuming plane, any more than it could be made as a rather weak and ineffectual adjunct to swordplay if magic-users were to become a class of player-character.

The basic assumption, then, was that *D & D* magic worked on a "Vancian" system and if used correctly would be a highly powerful and effective force. There are also four basic parts to magic: The verbal or uttered spell, the somatic or physical movement required for the conjuration, the psychic or mental attitude necessary to cast the spell, and the material adjuncts by which the spell, can be completed (to cite an obvious example, water to raise a water elemental). It was assumed that the *D & D* spell would be primarily verbal, although in some instances the spell would require some somatic component also (a fire ball being an outstanding example). The psychic *per se* would play little part in the basic magic system, but a corollary, mnemonics, would. The least part of magic would be the material aids required, and most of those considered stored or aided magic, so as to enable its more immediate employment, rather than serving to prolong spell casting time or encumber the player using these aids. Before exploring the whys and wherefores of these decisions, a further word regarding magical results must be said.

Spells do various things, and just what they do is an important consideration, for some order of effect in regard to the game would have to be determined. Magic purports to have these sorts of effects: 1) the alteration of existing substance (including its transposition or dissolution); 2) the creation of new substance; 3) the changing of normal functions of mind and/or body; 4) the addition of new functions to mind and/or body; 5) summon and/or command existing entities; and 6) create new entities. In considering these functions, comparatively weak and strong spells could be devised from any one of the six. Knowing the parameters within which the work was to be done then enabled the creation of the system.

Because the magic-using *D & D* player would have to be able to operate competitively with fellow players who relied on other forms of attack during the course of adventures, the already mentioned "Vancian" system was used as a basis, and spells of various sorts were carefully selected. Note, however, that they were selected within the framework of *D & D* competition primarily, and some relatively powerful spells were apportioned to lower levels of magic use. Charm Person and Sleep at 1st level are outstanding examples. The effect of some spells was set to reflect the level of the magic-user employing them. Many of the spells were developed for specific use in dungeon expeditions or during wilderness adventures. A few — mostly drawn from *CHAINMAIL* — were included with the table top battle in mind. All such spells were assumed to be of such a nature so that no less than three of the four basic components of magic were required in their use. All spells were assumed to have a verbal component. Each and every spell (not found on a scroll or otherwise contained in, or on, some magical device) would be absolutely mnemonic, magic-users would have to memorize the spells they wished to have available, and when a particular spell was recalled and its other parts enacted, then the memory would be gone and the spell no longer available until it was re-memorized (thus the magic-users' spell books!). Most spells were also envisioned as containing a slight somatic and/or material component, whether in the preparation of a small packet of magical or ordinary compounds to be used when the spell was spoken or as various gestures to be made when the enchantment was uttered.

Magic-use was thereby to be powerful enough to enable its followers to compete with any other type of player-character, and yet the use of magic would not be so great as to make those using it overshadow all others.

This was the conception, but in practice it did not work out as planned. Primarily at fault is the game itself which does not carefully explain the reasoning behind the magic system. Also, the various magic items for employment by magic-users tend to make them too powerful in relation to other classes (although the *GREYHAWK* supplement took steps to correct this somewhat). The problem is



further compounded by the original misconceptions of how magic worked in *D & D* — misconceptions held by many players. The principal error here is that the one 1st level spell allowable to a 1st level magic-user could be used endlessly (or perhaps at frequent intervals) without the magic-user having to spend time and effort re-memorizing and preparing again after the single usage. Many players also originally thought scrolls containing spells could be reused as often as desired. Finally, many dungeonmasters geared their campaigns to the level of TV giveaway shows, with gold pouring into players' purses like water and magical rewards strapped to the backs of lowly rats. This latter allowed their players to progress far too rapidly and go far beyond the bounds of *D & D*'s competition scope — magic-users, fighters, clerics and all.

To further compound the difficulties, many dungeon-masters and players, upon learning of the more restrictive intent of the rules, balked. They enjoyed the comic book characters, incredible spells, and stratospheric levels of their way of playing. Well and good. *D & D* is, if nothing else, a free-form game system, and it was designed with great variation between campaigns to be allowed for — nay, encouraged! Of course, there are some variations which are so far removed from the original framework as to be totally irreconcilable with *D & D*; these have become games of other sorts and not a concern of this article. On the other hand there are many campaigns which were scrapped and begun afresh after their dungeon-masters consulted us or after they read other articles pertaining to the play of *D & D* as conceived by its authors — just as there will probably be some dungeon-masters ready to try again after reading this far. It is for all of these referees and their players, as well as those who have played the game pretty much as was desired but were never quite positive that you were actually doing so, that the foregoing was written.

The logic behind it all was drawn from game balance as much as from anything else. Fighters have their strength, weapons, and armor to aid them in their competition. Magic-users must rely upon their spells, as they have virtually no weaponry or armor to protect them. Clerics combine some of the advantages of

the other two classes. The new class, thieves, have the basic advantage of stealthful actions with some additions in order for them to successfully operate on a plane with other character types. If magic is unrestrained in the campaign, *D & D* quickly degenerates into a weird wizard show where players get bored quickly, or the referee is forced to change the game into a new framework which will accommodate what he has created by way of player-characters. It is the opinion of this writer that the most desirable game is one in which the various character types are able to compete with each other as relative equals, for that will maintain freshness in the campaign (providing that advancement is slow and there is always some new goal to strive for).

This brings up the subject of new spells. The basic system allows for the players to create new spells for themselves at the option of the referee. It is certain that new spells will be added to the game system as the need arises, particularly with regard to new classes or sub-classes of characters or simply to fill in some needed gap. The creation of an endless number of more powerful spells is not desirable in the existing game system, and there is no intention of publishing 10th or higher level spells. As was said in a previous article, if character level progression is geared to the game system, it should take years for any magic-user to attain a level where the use of 9th level spells is possible!

As a last word regarding this subject, this *D & D* magic system explanation also serves another purpose. There should now be no doubt in dungeonmasters' minds with regard to the effect of a silence spell on a magic-user, or what will happen to the poor wizard caught in a mess of webs. They will know that a magic mouth is basically useless as a spell caster — with the exception of those spells which are based only on the verbal component of the spell. When an enterprising player tries a wizard lock on somebody's or something's mouth he will not be prone to stretch the guidelines and allow it. Magic is great. Magic is powerful. But it should be kept great and powerful in relation to its game environment. That means all the magic-users who have been coasting along with special dispensations from the dungeonmaster may soon have to get out there and root with the rest of the players or lie down and die.

GenCon Update

Plans are proceeding apace for the Premier Wargaming Event of '76. We are currently lining up all the judges that we'll need for all the tournaments. We will have complete listings of that in the next issue. In the meantime, a peek at a couple of new items.

Bob Blake, Rt. 1 Box 47, Valparaiso, IN 46383, needs DM's to help run a mammoth *D & D* tournament, that will span all three days of the con. The end result, after three days of dungeoneering, with the same characters, will be a champion Mage, Fighter, Cleric, Elf and Dwarf. Each participant will run a pre-determined character, and all participants will be judged on performance, with eliminations. Sounds really interesting to hear Bob tell it. Get the full lowdown from him if you are interested in being a DM.

We have another *D & D* variation we will try: *TEAM D & D!* What will happen is this: Teams of players will be formed. They can all be from one club or group, which is what we encourage, or they can just be a bunch of friends, or, if all else fails, they can be pick-up teams composed on the spot, by draw, or whatever. When the team enters the tourney, they will be paired at random against another team. One team will be designated as the Intruder, the other as the Thwarter. It is the job of the Intruder to enter the area in question, and fulfill some mission, or retrieve some object, or carry off some treasure, or some such task. It is incumbent upon the Thwarter to foil the Intruder. The referees will determine the relative effectiveness of each group, and the team that did the best will move on to the next round of eliminations. Eventually, only two teams will be left, and in the end, one.

We're expecting more dealers than last year. So far, Custom-Cast, MiniFig, Heritage, McEwan, CinC, SPI, Lou Zocchi, Ral-Partha & Taurus, LTD. have all said they are coming. AH says maybe. Hippocrene might be there, and a number of others are still unconfirmed but probable.

For people that pre-register, we are preparing a guide for motels, food, transportation and the like. It has been decided that we will not pre-register for tournaments, as last year saw a number of mixups and upset gamers. We will register for all the tournaments one hour before they are to be conducted. That will undoubtedly eliminate the high number of "no-shows" that we had last year. This year's tournaments will be timed better, due in part to the fact that we will be better equipped to handle all the necessary coordination that entails.

Movies! Jeff Perren has three new (for GenCon) flicks which he might bring. They are *THE THREE MUSKETEERS* (new version), *ROBIN HOOD* (Errol Flynn!) and *HENRY V*. These are excellent films, and, better still, Jeff says that he may acquire one or more others before August. How would you like to see *THE VIKINGS*??

Len Lakofka has planned an interesting fantasy miniatures event. Players will be assigned to opposing sides (rather like teams), and in this fashion about 64 participants will be involved in the first eight matches. The winning sides will then compete Saturday, these four teams coming down to a two-team final on Sunday. Len plans to use his adaptation of *CHAINMAIL/D & D*, so the complete rules will appear in the first issue of *THE DRAGON*.

Next issue will contain the complete information package, so stay tuned . . .

Editorial

Our editorial in **SR #5** seems to have stirred up a veritable hornet's nest, and also caused the true colors of a few in this business to shine out. We believe it is time to take the matter to the only arbitration that counts: that of the gaming public.

Avalon Hill, in the person of Donald Greenwood, New Products Manager, has replied. In replying, AH has made more than a few rather curious statements and assertions. We feel that our reply is best given to the public, so that we might go on record. Let us proceed apace.

Mr. Greenwood says, "While I can see why your people might be angered at a newcomer con claiming first national status — the fact remains that it was just that. Never before has a con received complete (sic) hobby and manufacturer support. Including GenCon — because most years AH & SPI weren't there to name just a few."

In another letter, he continues: "You can say what you want about the unfairness of AH and/or SPI calling the tunes, but the plain facts of the matter are that these two companies control the lion's share of the market, and any 'national' con without their support is simply kidding itself or national by right of forfeit only."

Well, what we'd like to say is this: Since when does the mere presence of either of these two companies' representatives bestow legitimacy? Are we to believe them to be from Olympus? Is their stationery bordered in Imperial Purple? Do they think they reside at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave? Really, gentlefolk, do your pens write on stone tablets? Wargaming is no longer the exclusive domain of one or two companies that it once was.

SPI came to an earlier GenCon; does that mean that THAT GenCon was a national con, but not the ones when they didn't grace us with their august presence?

Mr. Greenwood goes on in another letter . . . "A quick note to keep you informed of the convention picture-national-as we see it. I've talked to Howard Barasch and SPI/AH have agreed to recognize ORIGINS as the national con. Next year it will be held in NYC under SPI's auspices."

Hallelujah! Another decree from on high! And this for a con that nearly excluded miniatures! Like it or not, miniatures hold a large place in this market. AH's *TOBRUK* shows that they know this, they just didn't get it quite right. SPI's *TANK* is further proof that miniatures have a strong influence on the field, as further evidenced by the proliferation of tactical and one-to-one scale games.

We have been accused of excluding, or not featuring heavily enough, boardgaming at past GenCons. The truth of it is that GenCon supplied what the con-goer wanted. Recent GenCons have featured more and more boardgaming, as the desire grew. AH was invited early on to come to the early GenCons, and have their shot at seeing that the overbalance never occurred, but didn't deign to bother. Their loss. . .

AH and SPI maintain that it is in the interests of the hobby to have only one con, that will be supported by all. Funny that they should think so while they have ORIGINS under their thumb.

We have been accused of being a regional con. This simply isn't so. GenCon has always been advertised nationally, and entertained gamers from all over the country. It has stayed in Geneva for a number of valid reasons. For one thing, it was started by a bunch of gamers in the area, and took off in popularity. Another is that it is centrally located in respect to the rest of the country. It is equally accessible from both east and west. To claim that a con that has as yet only been held in the east, and is scheduled yet again for 77 in the east, truly serves the national gaming public is preposterous. The West Coast is completely ignored in assessing accessibility.

It is a well known fact that a lack of competition breeds stagnation. A gamer shouldn't go to a con because it's the ONLY con, but because it's the best con. Competition improves the breed, as evidenced by the marked improvement in gaming in the past 4 or 5 years. The game player can now pick and choose amongst many titles.

Only one con is not enough exposure if we wish the hobby to reach its full potential. The more interest we are capable of generating, the better our chances for growth.

We find it curious that the Eastern Establishment should all of a sudden take such an interest in cons. For years they studiously ignored them, brushing them off as the province of clubs or miniatures players. For a number of years, GenCon was the only advertised con of any size, anywhere, for the hobbyist. Now AH and SPI want to step in and dictate how the hobby will behave. There was a GenCon long before TSR. Could it be that the Eastern Establishment saw the possible profit, and so usurped ORIGINS? And now wishes to dictate to the rest?

We are most pleased that ORIGINS was created, regardless of the reasons, whatever they may be. It is GOOD for the hobby, in our opinion. What is bad for the hobby is the idea, that two companies decide to dictate to the rest.

The sun may rise in the East, but it travels across the Midwest, and sets in The West. NOBODY can change that, or gull many into thinking it . . .