

GAME BALANCE

by James M. Ward

Game Balance, GAME balance, GAME BALANCE! I have heard this term loudly proclaimed by Gary Gygax, Rob Kuntz, and even a time or two by the very excellent editor of this magazine, Tim Kask. The theme for these expounders of "game balance" is almost always the same: if a dungeon master runs a give-away game it can't be a well run game and the same thing applies in the opposite direction of not giving enough to the players. When somebody as semi-awesome as Gary or Tim are telling you this it becomes very difficult for someone like me to do anything but nod my head in agreement (and maybe try to change the subject). I do not want to give the impression that the above mentioned people will not listen to a different opinion, it is just that it is very hard to hold a different position from the originators of the subject. Getting back to the concept of "game balance" it seems to me that the above mentioned people want an even balance of players getting magic items and treasure so that in their games (which are excellent by the way) the player does not have an easy time of it or too hard a time (when they stay on their proper level). For this effect they want to make sure their castles do not have magic at the rate of a gold piece a dozen. Rob especially has always thought it highly humorous and slightly insane that I like magic more than gold and gems. The time has come to present a different concept (for all you long denounced and ridiculed "Monty Hall" dungeon masters) "GAME EQUILIBRIUM".

In game equilibrium the judge does not care, and in fact likes his players to be walking magic stores. The treasure hordes in his castle usually contain some type of magic, with one difference being that the guarders of these hordes usually use the magic items they guard, example: when the iron golem is being hard pressed by several plus 3 weapons he breaks open one of the chests he was guarding and pulls out a plus 5 vorpal blade and starts swinging.

The above takes me to how the judge is going to keep his game from becoming too easy for his regular players. In game equilibrium while the judge does not care about the amount of magic his players get he does care about the *quality* of his monsters. Instead of rolling for the spells of the magic users and priests among his wandering monsters the judge gives them the most powerful of the attack spells, instead of rolling to see if a dragon breathes or bites the dragon always breathes

the first two turns, for the higher level wandering human types they always have men at arms followers to back them up. These points are just to make the wandering monsters tougher, another aspect of game equilibrium is the toughening up of the placed monsters. The equilibrium dungeon master shies away from the simple treasure guarded by a monster type room (which can become boring fast if that is what your castle is full of), he leans toward the device guarded (must figure it out to get the treasure) type room, example: room with a large pool in the shape of a gold dragon filled with shimmering silver water, taking the liquid out causes it to turn into plain water stepping into the pool does one of six things depending on the roll of the die: 1. you are able to talk with the Platinum Dragon and he will look favorably upon you, 2. the queen of the dragons comes and breathes on you, 3. you are able to breathe as an old green dragon for one day, 4. you are granted a wish, 5. the pool tells you of a treasure on the level beneath the one you are on, 6. the pools liquid turns to stone until you are dead. When using game equilibrium in any given level with 20 placed treasure hordes 15 of them should be guarded by noncreature type things. Keeping the concept in mind do not hesitate to place 4th and 5th level monsters on your second and third levels and when your players shout, "a druid and 6 beserkers, what are they doing here?" "Guarding a great treasure, what else!" is your reply.

The final point to "game equilibrium" is what happens when your constant players get those great magic items (Rods of Absorption, Spheres of Annihilation, Wizard's Robes, etc.) and start cleaning up in your castle. The key to stopping this situation is "imagination". You start designing magic items that counteract the affects of the more powerful items on the magical charts, example: "Oh, you say that your ring of spell turning should turn that spell because you rolled and 97% of it was turned back, well didn't you notice that this magic user and his men at arms are all dressed like Vikings and the magic user is using runes not spells against you...." "Oh, you say that with your girdle of Storm giant strength you should be doing 7-42 points of damage on that puny hero? Well, this puny hero has a ring of reverse hit die and you are taking that 7-42 points damage this turn. . . ." "Oh, you say that your talisman of lawfulness should have sent that EHP to the center of the earth, well it seems that a demi-god of Set gave this EHP an amulet to protect him from just such an attack." I do not want any reader to think that this type of thing should be the case with every treasure, but 8 or 9 of them on any given level not only makes more of a challenge for the player it is more fun for you.

The end result of all the things presented above is that the judge can have many magical treasures in his or her castle without creating monstrous player characters that are unkillable. So, for all you "Monty Hall" type judges, take heart; your day is coming!

Dragon Rumbles — cont. fr. pg. 2

on their campaign, or ruins, or dungeon levels all day long. They become zealots of the worse kind, and the *fun* of gaming is lost. I have seen years-long friendships *destroyed* over the loss of a *player-character*; something that only exists in the imagination!

Our recent SNITS games are an excellent case in point. SNIT SMASHING was an experiment that was a success from our point of view. I wanted a *fun* game that would have wide age appeal, about *NOTHING*. By that, I mean that I was looking to see if a game could be successfully received if it was about nothing familiar or known. Tom Wham invented snits in another comic strip he was doing for TD at the time, and we knew we had an experimental vehicle. We had so much fun with the prototype that by the time we got it into print, we felt we should do another snit game.

We stuck with the good things we'd learned; in fact, we even improved some of them. I had wanted a fun, fast, playable game; the initial letters and phone calls assured us we had the right idea. Our funny, fast, satirical (after all, if you can play quickie games about being a computer with hordes of bizarre little robots, or being bugs, or fighting cybernetic tanks (which I rather liked), why can't you be a snit or a bolotomus?) game was a success. SNIT'S REVENGE was even quicker, and just as much fun. At both of our last two mini-cons, SNIT'S REVENGE has been an overwhelmingly favorite tournament game.

And yet, you should hear some of the cries of anguish! They failed miserably to perceive what the two games were. TSR has been called to


task for printing them by persons ignorant of what they were; a couple of fun, mildly diverting games, with no other deep significance. Must fun be sacrificed on the altar of "serious" gaming?

Wargaming conventions are supposed to be *fun*, but go observe a tournament and see how much fun is being had. I've judged a number of tournaments, both at Origins and GenCon, and participated in a few at earlier GenCons, and the atmosphere was seldom *fun*. Some of the tension can be attributed to greed-wanting to win that prize. Some can be attributed to nervousness. Where does the rest come from? I'm all in favor of concentration, but not to where it excludes pleasure. Competition is fine, and often a lot of fun, but there are groups you run across that make you glad weapons aren't allowed.

Lighten up! Hobbies are supposed to be fun, and give the hobbyist pleasure. Wargaming should not be the exception. After all, it's all just a mental exercise . . .

Timothy J Kask
Editor

Timothy Kask



Lyle's Hobby & Craft Center

Large Selection of Wargames

38 North Cass Ave.
Westmont, Ill. 60559

852-8085