

THE MELEE IN D&D®

by Gary Gygax

There is some controversy regarding the system of resolving individual battles used in DUNGEONS & DRAGONS and the somewhat similar ADVANCED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS melee system. The meat of D&D is the concept of pure adventure, the challenge of the unknown, facing the unexpected and overcoming all obstacles. At times this requires combat with spell, missile, and hand-to-hand fighting. How crucial to the game as a whole is the melee? What part should it play? Is "realism" an important consideration? To put the whole matter into perspective, it is necessary to point out that there is probably only a small percentage of the whole concerned with possible shortcomings in the melee system, but even 1% to perhaps 5% of an audience of well over 100,000 enthusiasts is too large a number to be totally ignored. To the majority who do not have problems with the rationale of fantasy melee as presented in D&D, what follows will serve to strengthen your understanding of the processes and their relationship to the whole game. For those who doubt the validity of D&D combat systems, the expostulation will at least demonstrate the logic of the systems, and perhaps justify them to the extent that you will be able to use them with complete assurance that they are faithful representations of the combat potential of the figures concerned.

There can be no question as to the central theme of the game. It is the creation and development of the game persona, the fantastic player character who is to interact with his or her environment — hopefully to develop into a commanding figure in the milieu. In order to do so, the player character must undergo a continuing series of activities which are dictated by the campaign at large and the Dungeon Master in particular. Interaction can be the mundane affairs of food, equipment and shelter, or it can be dealing with non-player characters in only slightly less routine things such as hiring of men-at-arms, treating with local officials, and so on. But from even these everyday affairs can develop *adventures*, and adventures are, of course, the meat of D&D; for it is by means of adventuring that player characters gain acumen and the wealth and wherewithal to increase in ability level. The experience, actual and that awarded by the DM, is gained in the course of successive adventures, and it is most common to engage in combat.

Hacking and slewing should not, of course, be the first refuge of the beleaguered D&Der, let alone his or her initial resort when confronted with a problem situation. Naturally enough, a well run campaign will offer a sufficient number of alternatives as well as situations which encourage thinking, negotiation, and alternatives to physical force, by means of careful prompting or object lessons in the negative form. Aside from this, however, combat and melee will certainly occupy a considerable amount of time during any given adventure, at least on the average. Spell and missile combat do not consume any appreciable amount of time, but as they are also often a part of an overall melee, these factors must be considered along with hand-to-hand fighting.

What must be simulated in melee combat are the thrusts and blows (smashing and cutting) of weapons wielded as well as natural body weaponry of monsters — teeth, claws, and so forth. Individual combat of this sort can be made exceptionally detailed by inclusion of such factors as armor, weapon(s), reflex speed, agility, position of weapon (left or right hand or both), training, strength, height, weight, tactics chosen (attack, defend, or in a combination), location of successful blows, and results of injury to specific areas. If, in fact, D&D were a game of simulation of hand-to-hand combat utilizing miniature figurines, such detail would be highly desirable. The game is one of adventure, though, and combats of protected nature (several hours minimum of six or more player characters are considered involved against one or more opponents each) are undesirable, as the majority of participants are most definitely *not* miniature battle game enthusiasts. Time could be reduced considerably by the inclusion of such factors as death blows — a kill at a single stroke, exceptionally high amounts of damage — a modified form of killing at a single stroke, specific hit location coupled with specific body hit points, and special results from hits — unconsciousness, loss of member, incapacitation of member, etc.

Close simulation of actual hand-to-hand combat and inclusion of immediate result strokes have overall disadvantages from the standpoint of the game as a whole. Obviously, much of the excitement and action is not found in melee, and even excitement and action is not found in melee, and even shortening the process by adding in death strokes and the like causes undue emphasis on such combat. Furthermore, D&D is a role playing campaign game where much of the real enjoyment comes for participants from the gradual development of the game personae, their gradual development, and their continuing exploits (whether successes or failures). In a system already fraught with numberless possibilities of instant death — spells, poison, breath and gaze weapons, and traps — it is too much to force players to face yet another. Melee combat is nearly certain to be a part of each and



All Treasure in A Dungeon is
not measured in Gold pieces.

sibility of character death highly likely, but it also allows the wise to withdraw if things get too tough — most of the time in any case.

The D&D combat systems are not all that “unrealistic” either, as will be discussed hereafter. The systems are designed to provide relative speed of resolution without either bogging the referee in a morass of paperwork or giving high probability of death to participants’ personae. Certainly, the longer and more involved the melee procedure, the more work and boredom from the Dungeon Master, while fast systems are fun but deadly to player characters (if such systems are challenging and equitable) and tend to discourage participants from long term commitment to a campaign, for they cannot relate to a world in which they are but the briefest of candles, so to speak.

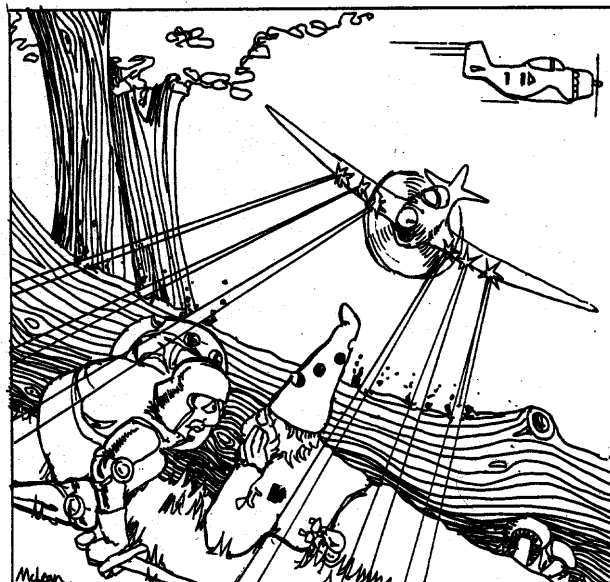
In order to minutely examine the D&D combat system as used in the ADVANCED game, an example of play is appropriate. Consider a party of adventurers trekking through a dungeon’s 10’ wide corridor when they come upon a chamber housing a troop of gnoll guards. Let us assume that our party of adventurers is both well-balanced in character race and class. They have a dwarf, gnome, and halfling in the front rank. Behind them are two half-elves. The last rank consists of three humans. Although there are eight characters, all of them are able to take an active part in the coming engagement; spells and missiles can be discharged from the rear or middle rows. The center rank characters will also be able to engage in hand-to-hand combat if they have equipped themselves with spears or thrusting pole arms which are of size useful in the surroundings. The front rank can initially use spells or missiles and then engage in melee with middle rank support, assuming that the party was not surprised. Whether or not any exchange of missiles and spells takes place is immaterial to the example, for it is melee which is the activity in question. Let us then move on to where the adventurers are locked in combat with the gnolls.

Each melee round is considered to be a one minute time period, with a further division into ten segments of six seconds each for determination of missile fire, spell casting and the striking of multiple telling blows. Note that during the course of a round there are assumed to be numbers of parries, feints, and non-telling attacks made by opponents. The one (or several) dice roll (or rolls) made for each adversary, however, determines if a *telling* attack is made. If there is a hit indicated, some damage has been done; if a miss is rolled, then the opponent managed to block or avoid the attack. If the participants picture the melee as somewhat analogous to a boxing match they will have a correct grasp of the rationale used in designing the melee system. During the course of a melee round there is movement, there are many attacks which do not score, and each “to hit” dice roll indicates that there is an opening which may or may not allow a telling attack. In a recent letter, Don Turnbull stated that he envisioned that three sorts of attacks were continually taking place during melee:

- 1) attacks which had no chance of hitting, including feints, parries, and the like;
- 2) attacks which had a chance of doing damage but which missed as indicated by the die roll; and
- 3) attacks which were telling as indicated by the dice roll and subsequent damage determination.

This is a correct summation of what the D&D melee procedure subsumes. Note that the skill factor of higher level of higher levelfighters — as well as natural abilities and/or speed of some monsters — allows more than one opportunity per melee round of scoring a telling attack as they are more able to take advantage of openings left by adversaries during the course of sparring. Similarly, zero level men, and monsters under one full hit die, are considered as being less able to defend; thus, opponents of two or more levels of hit dice are able to get in one telling blow for each such level or hit die.

This melee system also hinges on the number of hit points assigned to characters. As I have repeatedly pointed out, if a rhino can take a maximum amount of damage equal to eight of nine eight-sided dice, a maximum of 64 or 72 hit points of damage to kill, it is positively absurd to assume that an 8th level fighter with average scores on his or her hit dice and an 18 constitution, thus having 76 hit points, can physically withstand more punishment than a rhino before being killed. Hit points are a combination of actual physical constitution, skill at the avoidance of taking real physical damage, luck and/or



Y'KNOW, WIZ, WHEN YOU SAID THE TREASURE WAS GAURDED BY TWO FIGHTERS, I SORT OF FIGURED YOU MEANT LORDS OR MIRMIDONS OR SOMETHING IN THAT LINE.

magical or divine factors. Ten points of damage dealt to a rhino indicated a considerable wound, while the same damage sustained by the 8th level fighter indicates a near miss, a slight wound, and a bit of luck used up, a bit of fatigue piling up against his or her skill at avoiding the fatal cut or thrust. So even when a hit is scored in melee combat, it is more often than not a grazing blow, a scratch, a mere light wound which would have been fatal (or nearly so) to a lesser mortal. If sufficient numbers of such wounds accrue to the character, however, stamina, skill, and luck will eventually run out, and an attack will strike home . . .

I am firmly convinced that this system is superior to all others so far conceived and published. It reflects actual combat reasonably, for weaponry, armor (protection and speed and magical factors), skill level, and allows for a limited amount of choice as to attacking or defending. It does not require participants to keep track of more than a minimal amount of information, it is quite fast, and it does not place undue burden upon the Dungeon Master. It allows those involved in combat to opt to retire if they are taking too much damage — although this does not necessarily guarantee that they will succeed or that the opponents will not strike a telling blow prior to such retreat. Means of dealing fatal damage at a single stroke or melee routine are kept to a minimum commensurate with the excitement level of the system. Poison, weapons which deliver a fatal blow, etc. are rare or obvious. Thus, participants know that a giant snake or scorpion can fell with a single strike with poison, a dragon or a 12 headed hydra or a cloud giant deliver considerable amounts of damage when they succeed in striking, and they also are aware that it is quite unlikely that an opponent will have a *sword of sharpness*, a *vorpall blade*, or some similar deadly weapon. Melee, then, albeit a common enough occurrence, is a calculated risk which participants can usually determine before engaging in as to their likelihood of success; and even if the hazards are found to be too severe, they can often retract their characters to fight again another day.

Of course, everyone will not be satisfied with the D&D combat system. If DM and players desire a more complex and time consuming method of determining melee combat, or if they wish a more detailed but shorter system, who can say them nay. However, care must be taken to make certain that the net effect is the same as if the correct system had been employed, or else the melee will become imbalanced. If combat is distorted to favor the player characters, experience levels will rise too rapidly, and participants will become bored with a game which offers no real challenge and whose results are always a foregone conclusion. If melee is changed to favor the adversaries of player characters, such as by inclusion of extra or special damage when a high

number is rolled on a "to hit" die, the net results will also be a loss of interest in the campaign. How does a double damage on a die score of 20 favor monsters and spoil a campaign? you ask. If only players are allowed such extra damage, then the former case of imbalance in favor of the players over their adversaries is in effect. If monsters are allowed such a benefit, it means that the chances of surviving a melee, or withdrawing from combat if things are not going well, are sharply reduced. That means that character survival will be less likely. If players cannot develop and identify with a long lived character, they will lose interest in the game. Terry Kuntz developed a system which allowed for telling strokes in an unpublished game he developed to recreate the epic adventures of Robin Hood *et al*. To mitigate against the loss at a single stroke, he also included a saving throw which allowed avoidance of such death blows, and saving throw increased as the character successfully engaged in combats, i.e. gained experience. This sort of approach is obviously possible, but it requires a highly competent designer to develop.

Melee in D&D is certainly a crucial factor, and it must not be warped at risk of spoiling the whole game. Likewise, it is not unrealistic — if there is such a thing as "realism" in a game, particularly a game filled with the unreal assumptions of dragons, magic spells, and so on. The D&D melee combat system subsumes all sorts of variable factors in a system which must deal with imaginary monsters, magic-endowed weaponry, and make-believe characters and abilities. It does so in the form as to allow referees to handle the affair as rapidly as possible, while keeping balance between player characters and opponents, and still allowing the players the chance of withdrawing their characters if the going gets too rough. As melee combat is so common an occurrence during the course of each adventure, brevity, equitability, and options must be carefully balanced.

Someone recently asked how I could include a rule regarding weapons proficiency in the ADVANCED game after decrying what they viewed as a similar system, bonuses for expertise with weapons. The AD&D system, in fact, penalizes characters using weapons which they do not have expertise with. Obviously, this is entirely different in effect upon combat. Penalties do not change balance between character and adversary, for the player can always opt to use non-penalized weapons for his or her character. It also makes the game more challenging by further defining differences in character classes and causing certain weapons to be more desirable, i.e. will the magic hammer + 1 be useful to the cleric? It likewise adds choices. All this rather than offering still another method whereby characters can more easily defeat opponents and have less challenge. How can one be mistaken as a variation of the other? The answer there is that the results of the two systems were not reflected upon. With a more perfect understanding of the combat system and its purposes, the inquirer will certainly be able to reason the thing through without difficulty and avoid spoiling the game in the name of "realism."

Realism does have a function in D&D, of course. It is the tool of the DM when confronted with a situation which is not covered by the rules. With the number of variables involved in a game such as D&D, there is no possibility of avoiding situations which are not spelled out in the book. The spirit of the rules can be used as a guideline, as can the overall aim of rules which apply to general cases, but when a specific situation arises, judgement must often be brought into play. Sean Cleary pointed this out to me in a letter commenting on common misunderstandings and difficulties encountered by the DM. While the ADVANCED system will make it absolutely clear that clerics, for example, have but one chance to attempt to turn undead, and that there is no saving throw for those struck by undead (life level is drained!), there is no possibility of including minutia in the rules. To illustrate further, consider the example of missile fire into a melee. Generally, the chances of hitting a friend instead of a foe is the ratio of the two in the melee. With small foes, the ratio is adjusted accordingly, i.e. two humans fighting four kobolds gives about equal probabilities of hitting either. Huge foes make it almost impossible to strike a friend, i.e. aiming at a 12' tall giant's upper torso is quite unlikely to endanger the 6' tall human of a *javelin of lightning bolts* into a melee where a human and a giant are engaged. The missile strikes the giant; where does its stroke of lightning travel? Common sense and reality indicate that the angle of the javelin when it struck the giant will dictate that the

stroke will travel in a straight line back along the shaft, and the rest is a matter of typical positions and angles — if the human was generally before the giant, and the javelin was thrown from behind the human, the trajectory of the missile will be a relatively straight line ending in the shaft of the weapon and indicating the course of the bolt of lightning backwards. The giant's human opponent will not be struck by the stroke, but the lightning will come close most probably. Therefore, if the human is in metal armor a saving throw should be made to determine if he or she takes half or no damage.

In like manner, reality can illustrate probabilities. If three husky players are placed shoulder to shoulder, distances added for armor, and additional spaces added for weapon play, the DM can estimate what activities can take place in a given amount of space. Determination of how many persons can pass through a door 5' wide can be made with relative ease — two carefully, but if two or three rush to pass through at the same time a momentary jam can occur. How long should the jam last? How long would people actually remain so wedged? With an added factor for inflexible pieces of plate mail, the answer is probably one or two segments of a round. Of course, during this period the jammed characters cannot attack or defend, so no shield protection or dexterity bonus to armor class would apply, and an arbitrary bonus of + 4 could be given to any attackers (an arbitrary penalty of -4 on saving throws follows).

The melee systems used in D&D are by no means sacrosanct. Changes can be made if they are done intelligently by a knowledgeable individual who thoroughly understands the whole design. Similarly, "realism" is a part of melee, for the DM must refer to it continually to adjudicate combat situations where no rules exist, and this handling is of utmost importance in maintaining a balanced melee procedure. With this truly important input from the referee, it is my firm belief that the D&D system of combat is not only adequate but actually unsurpassed by any of its rival's so-called "improvements" and "realistic" methods. The latter add complication, unnecessary record keeping, or otherwise distort the aim of a role playing game — character survival and identification. What is foisted off on the gullible is typically a hodge-podge of arbitrary rulings which are claimed to give "realism" to a make-believe game. Within the scope of the whole game surrounding such systems, they might, or might not, work well enough, but seldom will these systems fit into D&D regardless of the engineering attempts of well-meaning referees.

The logic of the D&D melee systems is simple: They reasonably reflect fantastic combat and they work damn well from all standpoints. My advice is to leave well enough alone and accept the game for what it is. If you must have more detail in melee, switch to another game, for the combat portions of D&D are integral and unsuccessful attempts to change melee will result in spoiling the whole. Better to start fresh than to find that much time and effort has been wasted on a dead end variant.

AND A FEW ADDITIONAL WORDS . . .

Those of you who read the first article in this series ("Dungeons & Dragons, What It Is And Where It Is Going," DRAGON #22) will appreciate knowing that TSR is now in the process of creating its Design Department. Jean Wells is now on the staff in order to give the game material with a feminine viewpoint — after all, at least 10% of the players are female! Lawrence Shick also joined us recently, and he will work primarily with science fantasy and science fiction role playing adventure game material, although you'll undoubtedly be seeing his name on regular D&D/AD&D items as well. In the coming months I envision the addition of yet more creative folks, and as new members are added to our staff, you'll read about it here. What TSR aims to do is to assure you that you get absolutely the finest in adventure gaming regardless of the form it is in; and the new Design Department will answer your questions, handle the review of material submitted for possible publication by TSR, appear at conventions, design tournaments, author material for this publication (and probably for other vehicles as well), and create or assist with the creation of playing aids and new forms of adventure games. This is a big order, certainly, but both Jean and Lawrence are talented and creative gamers. Expect great things from them, and the others who will join them soon, in the months to come!