

Curing the Monty Haul malady

by Roger E. Moore

The following passages were taken and edited from letters received by DRAGON® Magazine in the last year. As you read through them, ask yourself if some of them describe situations that have occurred in your own AD&D™ campaign.

"My players have characters who have created spells that propel them through time and space at tremendous rates. They have looted the future and brought back devices that could destroy Greyhawk and many of the planes. They own several Battlestars, and they also have a large stock of AT-AT Walkers from *The Empire Strikes Back*. How do I keep them from destroying Greyhawk and creating an incredibly boring campaign?"

"One player I know in an AD&D game has a human character who has changed his race and class several times, and is now multiclassed in four classes. He decided his character would kill Orcus, and after that his character became the new prince of the undead, with an unlimited amount of any undead to control, even an unlimited number of liches. The character also has some star destroyers he uses to fly around in space or to destroy planets. This character

has a permanent prismatic sphere around him that even moves with him. He says he made it by wishing a couple of thousand times. How does one deal with this kind of player in a campaign?"

"I have a 65th level cleric character, and want to know if he can get more spells or magic items. Also, how many times can my character use his spells at will (if high-level characters can use several spells at once)?"

"I knew a character in an AD&D campaign who was able to slay the god Thor by using a push spell on him, knocking him off a tall wall. The hammer Mjolnir did not fall off the wall and the character got it."

"Our Dungeon Master has a campaign in which a 4,000th level magic-user/cleric runs a magic shop, in which characters can buy artifacts and relics for the prices listed in the DMG. If a character walks in with the right amount of money, he can get anything. Is it possible to have an NPC like that, and is it advisable?"

My first reaction upon reading these letters was frank disbelief. AT-AT Walkers marching across Greyhawk? Prince of the undead? Killing Thor with a *push* spell? 4,000th level characters?

After reading through a pile of letters like these, however, I remembered AD&D games that I refereed long ago, and characters that I once played. When I began as a DM in 1977, I ran adventures in which the characters met 20 dragons, of all colors, in a single day (by "random roll," of course). My group was started on a quest for the Silmarils of Tolkien fame, and met preposterously huge dragons and other gargantuan beasts guarding the various treasures. Other characters in an old campaign of mine were able to find things like Captain America's shield, Excalibur, and other assorted artifacts after cutting their way through the minions of a 30th-level lich to do it.

As player characters, I've run a minotaur demi-god/demon-prince who attacked other deities on impulse (though not successfully), and once I played a gold dragon who had three female henchdragons named Farrah, Kate, and Jacqueline. You get the idea. . . . As much as I'd like to whitewash my past abuses of AD&D and D&D® games, it cannot be done (my friends would remind me of them, for one thing). The memories come in handy, however, when reading letters like those above.

The AD&D game system is a very complicated one. Dungeon Masters have to absorb many rules to run a game well, and the prospect of running a campaign can be very intimidating. Most DMs want to run adventures that keep the players challenged and happy; killing off characters, even when done fair and square, is intimidating, too. Some players will pout for days if their characters get killed or don't get what they want, and this can be rough on everyone. These problems can put lots of pressure on the referee to start altering the scope and balance of the campaign. If my best friend Bob really wants his character to have Odin's rune wand that badly, well, maybe there's a way . . .

The hidden problem, of course, is that giveaway games like this pale very quickly. Soon no one feels challenged by anything the DM throws at them, people get bored, and the game folds. Sometimes one or two players are shown exceptional favoritism in a campaign by the DM, and everyone else gets shafted. No matter how you do it, giveaway games like those described above will produce nothing whatsoever but a sorry, frustrating mess.

Players generally enjoy running characters who are powerful and garner respect from other characters in the game. Few people want weak or incompetent characters in any role-playing system. The motivation to have a strong character sometimes leads to cheating (altering die rolls and ability scores, writing down magic items the character never gained, or DMing one's own

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characters). Players often put demands upon the DM for less powerful monsters and more treasures, and get caught up in a race for the "bestest with the mostest."

Unfortunately, this only brings the end of the game closer at hand. If the gods can be slain without trouble, what is there left to do? The game was supposed to be fun, but soon it isn't. Is there something wrong with the game?

No, the game is fine. It takes time to establish balance in an AD&D campaign, and it is frankly impossible for anyone to run a campaign for any length of time without having the game get out of balance at some point or another. In other words, it is normal to have problems somewhat like those described at the start of this article — normal, but not desirable.

When a gaming group starts out, the chances of the game getting out of balance rise considerably if everyone wants to fiddle with the rules right away. The more alterations, the further out of whack the game goes. By the time everyone is aware of the problem, it is far too late to change anything without dumping the campaign and starting completely over — with first-level characters, and using the rules as they are before you start altering anything.

"What about my 65th level cleric?" Well, either the cleric goes or the game goes; the game can exist without the cleric, but the cleric can't continue to exist without the game, so . . .

The value in starting over is that now everyone has at least some idea of how the game works (and how it isn't supposed to work). The sour taste of a runaway campaign makes players that much more reluctant to repeat the mistake again. Second campaigns are generally more balanced than their predecessors, and most players I've known (myself included) have found them more fun to play in.

Not everyone may get tired of a Monty Haul campaign at the same time. A gaming group may split up into ultra-level gamers and those who begin, with a fresh campaign and characters. It usually seems to happen that the group starting over again will acquire more game-players than the other group, and the Monty Haul group will dwindle in membership. The willingness to start over again is a mark of maturity and flexibility, and this will attract players who admire and practice those qualities.

"But I like playing high-level characters!" So do I, but I find that building a character up to high level is more entertaining when starting from the lower levels and working him up by the rules. Characters run in this manner are more believable, more colorful, and have more interesting personalities than those slapped together in a Monty Haul campaign; their flair and liveliness make them more fun to play. The minotaur demi-god character I used long ago was not as much fun to play as my 5th-level fighter/7th-level thief gnome character,

Cyragnome de Bergerac. Cyragnome is obnoxious, speaks with an outrageous French accent, and gives everyone who meets him severe heartburn. The minotaur just hacked and killed. Dull, dull, dull.

When I suggest starting over again and using the rules as they are, I am not saying that everyone should play only "official" AD&D games. All AD&D and D&D gamers eventually develop peculiar systems that they use in their campaigns with reasonable effect, though such systems (like critical hit tables, new monsters and magic items, new character classes and races, and so forth) are not official at all.

However, the more closely one works with the rules and the more often they are used, the better one understands how they work together in the game. In time, one can judge whether a particular rule change will throw a campaign out of balance or whether it will (for the players concerned) improve the enjoyment of the game. Understanding the rules and knowing them is the key to designing a game that keeps DM and player alike happy.

There is no crime in letting a campaign get out of control. The only crime comes in not learning from one's own mistakes. The best DMs and players are those who don't claim to be perfect, and who look for ways to improve the game for everyone's benefit.

A fresh campaign may be the answer you're looking for. It makes a pleasant change from killing gods with a push spell.

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