

The Name of the Game

A Beginner's Guide to Role-Playing Games by Marcus L Rowland

Part 1 of a series explaining what role-playing games are about and how to get started.

Bored with *Ludo*? Tired of *Monopoly* and *Scrabble*? Then Role-Playing Games (usually called RPGs) may be for you. Originating from sources as diverse as wargaming, method acting, and psychotherapy, they let you do anything from fighting a dragon to vaulting tall buildings at a single bound.

Normal wargames deal with combat on a relatively impersonal level – army against army, or even planet against planet. RPGs operate at a more personal level, and may sometimes involve no violence at all.

In RPGs each player controls a Player Character (PC), who continues from one game to another. They must deal with events in a world beyond normal experiences which can be anything from fantasy and horror, through science fiction, to historical events and modern spy and crime adventures. It's common to think of them as stories with their outcome determined by the players. Negotiation, persuasion, or a character's ability to play the violin might easily be more decisive than brute force.

Each character is described by a series of numbers representing real or abstract qualities like Strength, Endurance, or Charisma. These values are generally called prime requisites or characteristics, usually produced by rolling dice. (A variety of shapes; 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, and 20 sided dice are commonly used.)

Depending on the game there may be six, nine, or several dozen characteristics – most have less than ten. Characteristics vary from game to game, but in general each characteristic will make some form of activity easier or harder. Strength, for example, is generally related to the amount of damage inflicted in hand-to-hand combat, and the ability to lift weights, bend bars, force doors, etc.

There are several other attributes which may be important in a character. The most common is the possession of skills which make various types of action possible or easier. The number and type varies with the game. In the science fiction game *Traveller*, for example, characters are veterans of military or commercial organisations, and have acquired appropriate spacefaring skills during their service. Most games incorporating skills include some way of improving them.

The game universe is controlled and usually designed by a Referee, the person who runs the game and makes decisions on rules. The Referee will have a pre-written plot together with a map and notes of the contents of the location. He knows what's happening, and controls any situations, monsters, or Non-Player Characters (NPCs) met by the PCs in accordance with the plot. This sounds like a game which can only be won by

the Referee, but it's more like a film directed by the Referee and featuring a cast of characters who have to improvise their lines. The referee doesn't win or lose anything, but gets the fun of seeing the players react to the situation he has devised. The PCs usually co-operate to combat the referees' ploys, but may sometimes decide to attack each other regardless of the situation.

During a typical game each player controls one or more PCs, who have to perform some sort of task in the game universe. Depending on the game, an adventure or *scenario* might involve killing a dragon, rescuing a kidnapped diplomat, or carving out an interstellar commercial empire.

As an example, consider a science fiction game in which four player characters in a small scout ship are about to board an (apparently) deserted space station. First the referee sets the scene, then the players ask questions and explain their characters intentions. The referee will use dice or consult a table to determine the result of their actions:

Referee: 'The station seems to be intact. There are no obvious signs of trouble. However, there has been no answer to any of your signals.'

Player 1: 'Are there any signs of life?'

Referee: 'You can see lights behind two portholes.'

Player 2: 'Can we fly the ship close enough to look in?'

Player 3: 'I don't want to risk that. I don't think any of us are good enough pilots.'

Player 4: 'OK, I'll suit up and try to get over there with a jet pack, then I'll look through the ports.'

Player 2: 'Good move. It might be a good idea if you rig a line between our air lock and the station too.'

(The other players agree.)

Referee: *(Checks the spacesuit skill of player four's character.)* 'Roll two dice, if you get 5 or more you get there safely.'

Player 4: *(Rolls 9.)* 'OK, there's no problem. I'll look at the first porthole, and tell the others what I observe by radio. What do I see?'

Referee: 'You see a typical space station lounge and dining area. There is no-one there, and a table is upset.'

Player 2: 'Does he see anything to indicate that there is still air in the station?'

Referee: 'How could he tell?'

Player 1: 'If there was any inflatable furniture it would be swollen or burst.'

Player 4: 'Can I see any inflatables?'

Referee: 'No, all the furniture is made of hard plastic.'

Player 4: 'Can I see a ventilator?'

Referee: 'Yes. There are two ribbons tied to the grille in front of it, apparently moving in a breeze.'

Player 3: 'OK, then there is air.'

In this example the referee was looking at a plan of the station and notes on its compartments. The notes didn't mention a ventilator or ribbon, but since the referee knew that there was air, and that it wasn't important to the scenario, he decided to save time by adding this detail. Normally a referee will only describe the main features visible to characters, leaving the players to ask questions about less obvious details.

The common elements found in nearly all RPGs are the player character, the referee, and large quantities of paper and dice. Optional extras are lead or plastic figures to represent the characters in the scenario, gridded paper to scale movement and determine lines of fire in combat, and a lot of time and energy. Beyond these elements each game is different.

Dungeons & Dragons – The Big One

The first and most famous RPG is *Dungeons & Dragons*, usually called *D&D*, released by *Tactical Studies Rules [TSR]* in 1974. At first *D&D* was almost unknown in Britain, but it gradually developed a cult following among SF and fantasy fans who played it, liked it, and introduced it to their friends. If *D&D* had not been invented it is probable that the RPG hobby would not exist, since it paved the way for the many games currently available, for specialised game shops, and for magazines like *White Dwarf*. Many outsiders have never heard of any other game, and assume that *D&D* represents the entire hobby.

The setting for *D&D* is a pseudo-medieval heroic fantasy landscape populated by Halflings (Hobbits), Elves, Dwarves, and Humans, with frequent appearance by Orcs, Trolls, and (of course) Dragons. The *D&D* Referee is called the Dungeon Master (DM), and does most of the work of preparing and running a game. There are hundreds of ready-made scenarios ranging from easy beginner's material to extremely complex adventures designed for experienced players and DMs. The sheer volume of material produced for *D&D* is overwhelming – probably more than for all other RPGs combined. This wealth of material, advertising, and the accessibility of other players and referees, makes *D&D* the favourite game for beginners. There are currently (in December 1983) four *D&D* games – *Basic D&D* is designed for beginning players and referees, *Expert D&D* is an extension of *Basic D&D*, and *Advanced D&D* is a more complex version of the same game covering material for beginners and experienced players in greater depth. The fourth version, *Original D&D*, is a re-issue of the first printing of the *D&D* rules for collectors and those who don't

like any of the later versions. Two additional versions are on the way, both extensions to the Basic/Expert game. There are also official *D&D* figures, comics, books, video games, and even dolls. A *D&D* film is forthcoming, and American television already runs a *D&D* cartoon programme.

D&D character generation is quick and easy. There are six prime requisites (Strength, Intelligence, Wisdom, Dexterity, Constitution, and Charisma), all rolled randomly as the total of three six-sided dice (3d6). The character is then assigned a race (options being human, dwarf, elf, gnome, half-elf, halfling, or half-orc), alignment (Lawful, Neutral, or Chaotic combined with Good, Neutral, or Evil, a typical example being Lawful-Good), and Character Class.

All the forms of *D&D* (and most other TSR RPGs) assume that each character will act in a semi-specialised role, in *D&D*, called a Character Class. Some of the typical *D&D* classes are the Fighter,

the Magic-User, the Cleric, and the Thief. Each class is restricted in its use of weapons and magical equipment and has different attack probabilities in combat. Some classes are closed to members of some races, or to characters of certain alignments.

The character receives some money to purchase equipment and supplies, and then starts adventuring. At this stage the beginning character is a novice adventurer, and is a first level member of one (or sometimes two) character classes.

Levels are another important concept affecting a *D&D* PC. They control the amount of injury the character can survive, the chance of hitting an opponent, the number of spells available to magic-using classes, resistance to magic, and other skills and secondary capabilities. All characters begin at Level 1 (L1) and accumulate experience points towards a level rise. Points are awarded for killing monsters, finding treasure, rescuing fair

maidens, and anything else the DM feels like rewarding.

D&D combat is fairly simple. Briefly, each character or creature has a number of hit points (HP), indicating the damage that can be absorbed before the character is killed, and an Armour Class rating (AC); the higher the number the worse the armour. AC10 is bare skin, for example, while AC3 is plate mail. The opponent's AC determines the number the attacker must roll on a 20-sided dice to score a hit. If the number rolled is high enough (adding applicable bonuses such as from magical weapons or great strength), the blow connects, and the victim takes damage, rolled on another die according to the weapon type. A successful hit does not damage the victim's armour and usually causes no immediate reduction in the victim's ability to fight back. This is often criticised as an unrealistic system, but it is fast and works reasonably well.

D&D magic is related to the level of the character, to class, and to Intelligence or Wisdom. Most spell-using classes start at Level 1 with one fairly basic spell per day.

All *D&D* character classes can use magical equipment, but some equipment is only usable by certain classes. There is a huge variety of magical equipment in *D&D*, and most scenarios seem to introduce a few new items. It's rarely possible to buy magical equipment – usually characters have to find it in the course of their adventuring. The amount of treasure found on an expedition is usually related to the danger involved, so that a large dragon's hoard might include several items such as magically improved armour, powerful magic weapons, rings and potions.

The emphasis on experience and treasure tends to make most players fairly greedy, and inclined to kill or loot first and ask questions later. Most referees try to combat this tendency by adding traps, cursed magical equipment, and variant monsters which are far more lethal than they look. *D&D* publications support this tendency by adding new monster and treasures, and twists and variations on old themes.

Start-Up Materials: for *D&D* the *Basic Set*, rules, dice; *Expert Set*, rules, dice, adventure and for *Advanced D&D* the *AD&D Players Handbook*, *AD&D Dungeon Masters Guide*, *AD&D Monster Manual*.

Optional Extras: *TSR Scenarios*, *World of Greyhawk*, *AD&D Character Record Sheets* (TSR), *AD&D Fiend Folio* (Monsters from *White Dwarf*), *AD&D Deities and Demigods*, *AD&D Monster Manual 2*. All of the above are TSR publications, and are available in the UK.

A number of independent publishers also supply *D&D* material, and most gaming magazines and fanzines frequently include *D&D* scenarios and articles. Sources include *Games Workshop*, *Iron Crown Enterprises*, and *Judges Guild*, but there are many other less prominent suppliers. The standard of *D&D* material ranges from excellent to awful, so it's sensible to ask for advice when buying independent products. □

Next Issue: The second most popular fantasy RPG, *RuneQuest*, and other fantasy role-playing games.



The Name of the Game

A Beginner's Guide to Role-Playing Games by Marcus L Rowland

Part 2: A look at some more fantasy role-playing games, for the beginner.

Last issue's article explained the basic idea of role-playing games, and introduced the most popular and widely-known RPG – *Dungeons & Dragons*. Although *D&D* is popular, experienced players often find it a little too simplistic.

As soon as *D&D* became available other designers decided to produce their own fantasy rules, partly to correct the shortcomings of *D&D* and partly to make large sums of money. Probably the most successful RPG (apart from *D&D* itself) is *RuneQuest*, recently voted second most popular RPG by the readership of *White Dwarf*.

RuneQuest – A World of Difference

Although the basic idea of *RuneQuest* is superficially similar to *D&D*, the details are so well organised and coherent that their main elements have remained unchanged through two editions and several printings, and have been incorporated into several other *Chaosium* (the publisher) games. A third edition is due to appear, and it is anticipated that there will be few major rule changes.

RuneQuest is set in a Bronze Age world called Glorantha. Almost all player characters can use magic, and spells and religion play an extremely important part in Gloranthan culture. The section of Glorantha which has been described in most detail is Sartar. During the period covered by the game, Sartar is partially occupied by the Lunar Empire, a religious dictatorship founded by the Red Goddess of Peloria.

RuneQuest characters have seven randomly generated characteristics and nine figured characteristics. The main characteristics are Strength, Constitution, Size, Intelligence, Power, Dexterity, and Charisma. Size is the character's physical bulk and mass, Power is related to the character's ability to cast spells and resist magic, and reflects the character's status with his or her deity. All other characteristics are similar to those in *D&D*. These attributes are rolled on three six-sided dice (3d6) for humans. Characteristics can be improved as the PC progresses. Secondary figured characteristics include bonuses on attack, damage, parry, and defence capabilities, hit points, perception, stealth, manipulative ability, and general knowledge.

A character can be assumed to have spent five years service as a member of the militia, an apprentice, a barbarian tribesman, or as a mercenary. All these careers give some chance of increasing characteristics, some skill training, and possibly a few spells.

The structure of Gloranthan society favours characters who join guilds and religious cults. Cult taboos and practices replace most of the alignment concept

as seen in *D&D*, giving characters preferred behaviour patterns appropriate to their faith. The gods represent Law or Chaos, with good and evil largely irrelevant. As an example, members of the Storm Bull barbarian cult are berserk fighters opposed to Chaos. Each religion is linked to two or three Runes representing the principal characteristics of the deity; Storm Bull Runes are Death, Air, and Beast.

RuneQuest features two types of magic; Battle Magic, available to anyone for a price, and Rune Magic, derived from the Runes of cults. Both forms of magic cover a wide range of effects, from healing to increasing the effectiveness of weapons. All forms of magic require the sacrifice of points of Power

(POW). The use of harmful spells requires the caster to overcome his victim's POW with his own POW, so characters will become more vulnerable with each spell cast and each point of POW expended.

Each cult has several types of membership, from Lay member through Initiate to Rune Priest or Rune Lord. Rune Priests specialise in Rune spells and rituals, while Rune Lords concentrate on combat, cult and survival skills aided mainly by Battle magic.

The *RuneQuest* rulebook explains the organisation of cults and outlines two typical religions, while two additional source books (*Cults of Praxis* and *Cults of Terror*) cover twenty-two religions in more detail.

RuneQuest has fewer magic items



than most other FRP games. The main types are POW storage crystals, spell matrices (allowing a character to cast a spell without learning it, at normal POW costs), fragments of Truestone (a type of stone which can store a cast spell for future use), and potions which duplicate the effects of spells. The acquisition of treasure is not directly linked to any form of advancement, but characters who get rich can pay for training, spells, and other useful goodies.

The *RuneQuest* combat system is probably the main reason for the game's success. Although more complicated than that used in *D&D*, it is easy to learn, fairly fast, and far more realistic.

Each character has a number of hit points, derived from Constitution, which in turn assign points to various parts of the body. Thus a character with 16 hit points can take up to 6 points of damage to either leg, 6 points to the abdomen or head, 7 to the chest, and 5 to the arms. This adds up to 24 points, but if the total number of points of injury exceed 16 the character will die. Body areas are given armour ratings, reflecting the amount of protection worn. Each point of armour will absorb a point of damage from an attack. Thus bare skin is unarmoured, leather armour absorbs 1 or 2 points, and chainmail will absorb 5 points. Armour is added to the amount of equipment carried by the character (encumbrance), and its weight can slow a character considerably.

Each character or creature is skilled with one or more weapons, which can also be used to parry blows. Shields are also used as parrying weapons. Weapon skill and damage are derived from characteristics, training, and experience.

Combat involves the following principal stages:

1: The attacker rolls to hit (percentile roll under weapon skill), then, if successful, rolls to see which area is struck.

2: The defender may choose to oppose the attack with a parry (most defenders can only parry one attack a round), making a roll under parry skill with the weapon or shield used. If the parry is successful the blow is blocked, and the parrying weapon absorbs the damage. Weapons have their own hit points, and will break if the specified quantity is exceeded.

3: If the blow penetrates, the attacker rolls to see how much damage (by weapon type) is caused, and the defender subtracts the damage (less armour protection) from total hit points and from the points of the affected area. If the number of points of damage to a location exceed the area's hit points the character is partially or totally incapacitated until cured or dead. Limbs receiving more than 6 points of damage over their allocation are severed or maimed, and require immediate powerful healing spells or potions.

As characters successfully use weapons, parries, and other skills they are noted on record sheets. At the end of each adventure (or each week in a prolonged campaign) the player goes down the list, and attempts to make a percentile dice roll under 100 less the skill rating, modified for intelligence. If this roll is successful the skill level is increased by 5%, making successful use easier and

further improvement more difficult. POW can be increased by a similar process.

Since the *RuneQuest* combat system is based on all the characteristics of combatants, all creatures and monsters encountered in the game have their own characteristics and skills, used in the same way as those of humans. It's easy to have non-player characters, and races available include Elves, Baboons, Trolls, Centaurs, Dragonewts (tribal intelligent lizards), intelligent Ducks, Dwarves, and Ogres. The rules allow more alarming possibilities; one religion in *Cults of Terror* gives initiates a chance of becoming a vampire! Non-player monsters include almost unbeatable dragons, giant killer snails, giant amoebae, and goat-headed humanoids.

There are a lot of books, scenarios and supplements available but it is possible to run an effective campaign using the boxed game alone. Some referees even save money by buying only the *RuneQuest* Rulebook, and preparing all the additional material for themselves! All of the following are *Chaosium* publications and are readily available in the UK: *RuneQuest* Boxed Set – Rules, Scenario, etc (recommended for beginning players); *RuneQuest* Rulebook – (paperback); *RuneQuest* Rulebook (hardcover); *Cults of Prax* (15 neutral and lawful religions); *Cults of Terror* (7 chaotic religions); *Griffin Mountain* (wilderness campaign); *Questworld* (alternative campaign world); *Pavis* (city campaign); *The Big Rubble* (ruins campaign).

Many game magazines and fanzines frequently feature *RuneQuest* articles and scenarios, and there is a variety of independently-produced material available.

Other Fantasy Role-Playing Games

Dungeons & Dragons and *RuneQuest* are not the only FRP games available – there are many other systems, some good and some awful.

Tunnels & Trolls (T&T) – Flying Buffalo Inc

T&T is another early game, and features a 'fast and dirty' combat system and simplified rules which make it exceptionally easy to learn. Characters belong to one of four classes – Warriors, Wizards, Rogues, and Warrior/Wizards and may belong to several races, with characteristics modified for race. Characters must acquire experience points to gain levels, with each level increase allowing improvement of characteristics or the acquisition of new skills.

T&T magic requires the consumption of Strength points (similar to the use of POW points in *RuneQuest*). The rules for magic items are not particularly detailed, and a lot of the spells have rather silly names.

T&T combat requires each character and creature to compare points, modified by armour and shield factors, bonuses for weapons, and a die roll. The difference between the two totals is subtracted from the losers hit points. This process continues until the loser is dead or breaks off. Heavily unmatched combats are usually finished in a single round, but reasonably even fights can

last a long time.

The main advantages of *Tunnels & Trolls* is that the rules make running a solo adventure extremely easy. The majority of published *T&T* scenarios are in a solo format – most are extremely difficult and require a good deal of common sense. *T&T* is recommended for players in isolated areas who want to develop characters in solo adventures.

Chivalry & Sorcery (C&S)

– Fantasy Games Unlimited

C&S is probably the most complex FRPG available, and is probably not the best game for beginners. *C&S* scores by the use of an extremely detailed generation system (2-3 hours per character) which covers everything from the character's birth sign, social class, and ancestry to cooking ability and eye colour. All normal characteristics are included, of course. The game is set in medieval Europe, with optional rules for Norse and Mongol scenarios, prehistoric survivals, and a full-scale siege warfare system which may be the best medieval battle system available.

Highly recommended for experienced players and prolonged campaigns. At its best when dealing with statecraft, warfare, and diplomacy.

Warhammer (WH)

– Citadel/Games Workshop

Warhammer is an all-British production combining a fairly simple character generation system with extended rules for mass combats and battles. A feature of the rules is the use of pictures and references to the *Citadel* figures range, making selection of appropriate units easy. At present, follow up products include *Forces of Fantasy*, a kind of Expansion kit.

Useful for large scale campaigns, but more material is needed before the game will really become established.

Man, Myth, and Magic (MM&M)

– Yaquinto Games

Set in the ancient world (the latest scenarios being set in the first century AD), with the addition of working magic and a rather liberal attitude to historical fact. The generation system is fairly complex and sometimes a little irrational, and there are two conflicting rule books included in the boxed set. However, *MM&M* is the only RPG to cover this period in any detail, and referees with an interest in the era should find it useful.

Recommended for referees who don't mind anachronisms, and can cope with the authors' jocular style and awful puns.

Other FRPGs available: *T&T* Boxed Set (rules, solo dungeon, scenario, etc); *T&T* Rulebook only; *C&S* Boxed Set (three rulebooks); *WH* Boxed Set (three volumes); *MM&M* Boxed Set (three volumes, record sheets, etc).

All of these additional publications are from the game manufacturers. There are a lot of independently produced scenarios and rule extensions available, of varying quality, including some claimed to be suitable for any system. Two good examples of this type of product are the *Grimtooths Traps* volumes from *Flying Buffalo*, at £3.75 each. □

Next issue: *Science Fiction Role-Playing Games (SFRPG's)*.

The Name of the Game

A Beginner's Guide to Role-Playing Games by Marcus L Rowland

Part 3 of a series explaining what role-playing games are about and how to get started.

Once fantasy role-playing games became available, they began to attract a lot of attention from science fiction fandom, and SF conventions became the place where innocents were exposed to this strange new vice. Several science fiction role-playing games (SFRPG's) appeared, but there was no clear favourite until *Game Designer's Workshop* (GDW) published *Traveller* in 1977.

Traveller – The Worlds of the Imperium

Traveller is the most popular SFRPG, and owes much of its success to a modular approach which allows referees and players to buy as much, or as little, as they need. The basic rules occupy three small books, but GDW alone have published scores of supplements, adventures, and optional rule expansions.

Set several thousand years in the future, the background to *Traveller* is a vast interstellar empire, the Imperium, containing thousands of worlds and hundreds of races and cultures. There are several human races, all of Earth ancestry but spread through the galaxy long before the rise of Terran civilisation.

The Imperium is large enough to allow almost any type of adventure, and published sectors give some excellent backgrounds for events. The Imperium is at war with another human civilisation, the Zhodani, and the Spinward Marches sector is the scene for most of the battles. The fight has not extended far into the Imperium, but some areas are seething with excitement and will seize any reasonable chance to rebel. Individual worlds offer their own perils, ranging from hostile governments and environments to oppressive trade unions.

In the rules for character generation and combat, characters have six prime requisites: Strength, Dexterity, Endurance, Intelligence, Education, and Social Standing, all rolled on 2d6. All can be modified in the next stage of the generation procedure, the character's previous experience. *Traveller* characters acquire most of their skills before they begin their adventuring careers, in various forms of military and commercial service. Once prime requisites are known the player must choose a service, then make a 2d6 roll (modified for characteristics) for the PC to attempt to enlist. If the roll is unsuccessful the character is randomly drafted into one of six basic careers; Army, Navy, Marines, Scouts, Merchants, and 'Other' (usually criminal). It's entirely possible for a character to be drafted into the career the player originally chose. Once in the service (initially aged 18) the character passes through a four-year cycle with die rolls determining survival, promotion and re-enlistment. Skills are awarded for being a member of a profes-

sion (eg, all Scouts get Pilot skill), for each term of service, for promotion and commission, and for reaching certain ranks in some of the services. Most skills are awarded randomly and include enhanced characteristics (eg +1 Strength, +2 Education) as well as normal professional qualifications (eg Pilot, Navigator, Rifle). Skills are awarded as levels (eg Pilot-1, Blade-2, Electronics-3), and act as modifiers on die rolls in activities involving the skill. If the character dies before retirement the generation procedure begins again – this can sometimes be a tedious business, especially if characters are in the Scout service (mortality rate 75% or more). When the character fails to re-enlist (or retires), pensions and other benefits become available, including enhanced characteristics, weapons, and even private spacecraft. Optional rules allow characters to master Psionic skills, but there is prejudice against their use and most Imperials would cheerfully kill a known 'Esper'.

Combat is simple, with a 2d6 roll of 8 or more required to hit with any weapon, modified for range, skill, the type of weapon used, armour, surprise, terrain, and the physical characteristics of the user. All firearms do a minimum of 3d6 damage, with more advanced weaponry (lasers, fusion cannon, and the like) inflicting as much as 20d6 in a single shot. Injuries are subtracted from Strength, Dexterity, or Endurance, with the first wound subtracted from a random characteristic and all subsequent wounds taken from characteristics selected by the victim. Most wounds seriously hamper a character, since these three characteristics are used as modifiers in most combat situations. If any characteristic drops below zero the character is unconscious, if all go below zero the character is dead.

There is a section concentrating on the use, construction, and economics of interstellar spacecraft, (including ship to ship combat), covering everything from one-seater launches to 5 kiloton dreadnoughts. Additional sections cover training and skill improvement, medicine, and trade. Interstellar flight is rated in terms of *Jumps*, with each level of Jump equivalent to one parsec in normal space. All Jumps, regardless of distance, take a week, and require ships to be well away from large objects like planets. It's necessary to manoeuvre in and out of solar systems, making piracy possible. Maintenance and other problems mean that ships must usually dock for a week between Jumps.

Ships become heavier, less economical, and require better computers and more advanced technology as their Jump capacity increases. Jump 2 or 3

(J2 or J3) is usually the best a commercial ship can achieve, and J6 is just attainable by military couriers carrying a tiny amount of cargo and minimal crew. The rules are complex but include design checklists and several standard craft, which make setting up much easier.

There are rules covering world design, equipment (other than weapons), vehicles, and encounters. Each world has its own animal species, designed by the referee using the guidelines in this book. This section also explains how to run *Traveller* adventures, feed characters rumours and other information, engineer encounters etc.

It's possible to play *Traveller* with these rules only, but most referees prefer to expand beyond them. GDW tend to classify most *Traveller* material into groups: The main rules of the game are available in the UK as the *Starter Edition Traveller*. Books 4-6 are rule expansions for experienced referees.

Book 0. An introduction to *Traveller* for inexperienced players.

Book 4. *Mercenary* expands the character generation procedure for Army and Marine characters. It also includes more weapons and military vehicles, and a mass combat system for larger melees.

Book 5. *High Guard* expands the rules for Navy characters, and incorporates a much more complex starship design and combat system, capable of building craft as powerful as a *Star Wars* Death Star.

Book 6. *Scouts* expands the Scout trade and gives greatly extended rules for world and solar system generation. There are now 13 supplements, eg *Supplement 1, 1001 characters*; pregenerated characters for the services plus soldiers, police, and *Supplement 3, The Spinward Marches*; Subsector maps and world data for a galactic subsector. More will probably appear.

Book-length scenarios are also available. They cover the plot plus peripheral information which may be important as the game progresses. For example, *Adventure 4, Leviathan*, is set on board a huge merchant exploration ship. Sections cover the history of the area, rumours, hostile forces, plans of the ship, characteristics for all crew, sector maps, and details of several worlds.

To summarise, *Traveller* remains popular because it can be run at any level of complexity, and because there is a huge variety of material available, all of which is set in a coherent universe. Most of the books, supplements, and adventures are reasonably cheap, remain in print for a long time, and are readily available. There are no alien player characters, but a new publication (*The Traveller Alien*) should appear soon, to cover this omission.



Start-Up Materials:

Basic Traveller (Books 1-3; US only); *Deluxe Traveller* (Books 0-3, map, scenario, dice; US only); *The Traveller Book* (Hardcover: As 0-3, plus two scenarios and more illustrations); *Starter Traveller* (simplified rules). *Basic Traveller*, *Deluxe Traveller*, the *Traveller Book* or *Starter Traveller* are the minimum for play. However, *Starter Traveller* omits some rules that can be important in more complex scenarios. Additional Material: *Books 4, 5 and 6*; *Adventures*, *Double adventures* and *supplements*.

Most independent *Traveller* material meets reasonably high standards since GDW grant franchises, then inspect all products sold under the *Traveller* label before release. Manufacturers include *Paranoia Press*, *Judges Guild*, *FASA*, *Steve Jackson Games* and *Games Workshop*. Most game magazines have frequent *Traveller* articles, scenarios, and there is a *Traveller* magazine, *The Journal of the Travellers Aid Society*.

Other Science-Fiction Role-Playing Games

Until recently *Traveller* was the unchallenged leader of SFRPG's. However, several systems now contest GDW's rule of the starways.

Space Opera (SO)

- Fantasy Games Unlimited

Space Opera covers the same areas as *Traveller*, but uses much more complex character generation, world design, and combat rules. There is also much more information on ship design, psionics (the Force), and equipment.

Characters have a large number of prime requisites, allocated from points derived from dice rolls, leading to many

figured characteristics. It can take several hours to roll up a fully developed SO character, and the rules reflect the trouble involved by suggesting that the referee makes PC's virtually unkillable, using any sort of escape route (up to and including Divine Intervention) to save the characters' lives. This type of rule is often very funny in play.

Advantages of *Space Opera* are the extremely detailed rules and a variety of player races. However, this game is probably best for experienced players.

Star Frontiers (SF) - TSR

This game is TSR's assault on the SFRPG market, with rules bearing a marked resemblance to those of *Dungeons & Dragons*. The boxed set consists of basic rules, optional 'advanced' rules, and a scenario. It does not contain rules for spaceship design or combat, and a second game, *Night Hawks*, is needed to cover these important areas.

Most aspects of this game are similar to *D&D* (see part I of this series), and experienced *D&D* players will adapt to the rules with ease. Several scenarios and add-on packs have been produced, all bearing a marked resemblance to *D&D* material. A good buy for *D&D* players who haven't the time to adapt to a totally new rules structure.

Laserburn (LB) - Tabletop Games

This British mass-combat system is not a full RPG, but does include characteristics and skills which can be improved during play, and a historical background which is easily merged with other SFRPG's. Character generation is fast, and players usually run two or three characters per game.

The combat system consists of rolls to

hit, rolls to penetrate, and rolls for injury location and effect. Most weapons are lethal, but the rules make an effective hit fairly difficult and thus balance their power when a shot connects. The system is fairly quick, with multi-shot weapons causing the longest delays.

Laserburn is an amusing alternative to more normal RPG's, and is tied in to an excellent line of 15mm models. Beginners should find the rules easy to learn, though some areas (especially space travel) receive little or no attention.

Star Trek, The Role-Playing Game (ST) - FASA

This game is the first SFRPG to be tied in to a specific work of fiction. This process has a significant advantage, since most people who play the game can readily visualise the scenery and props involved. It has one disadvantage - everyone wants to play Kirk or Spock and no-one wants to play a security guard.

An essential step in this system is that the referee must indicate which post the character will occupy when generated, with die rolls modified to steer characters towards the desired position.

Combat is based on a roll to hit then roll to damage procedure, with armour subtracting points of damage. Most ST weapons can easily kill, and the rules stress that Federation personnel should never initiate combat and should always try to end confrontations peacefully.

An interesting innovation is the ship combat procedure, in which players act out their duties - controlling the shields, firing phasers, and shouting 'The engines willna' take it, Captain...'. No single player has complete control of the ship during a battle, and arguments over power allocation and tactics are common.

The main advantages of *Star Trek* are the familiarity factor and the fact that it's a relatively easy game to learn.

Other SFRPG's Material: *Space Opera* Boxed Set; *Ground and Air Equipment Supplement*; *Seldon's Spacecraft Compendium Supplement*; *Star Sector Atlases*; *Scenarios*.

Star Frontiers Boxed Set; *Night Hawks* (spacecraft); *Mini-module and Referees Screen* plus other *Scenarios*.

Laserburn Basic Rulebook; *Forces of the Imperium* (supplement); *Imperial Commander* (military rules); *Advanced Rules and Aliens* (rules); *Robots* (supplement) plus *Scenarios*.

Star Trek Boxed Set; *USS Enterprise* 15mm Deck Plans; *Klingon Type D15 Cruiser* 15mm Deck Plans; *Klingons* (racial supplement) plus *Scenarios*.

Currently there don't seem to be independent suppliers producing material for any of these games, and relatively few articles and scenarios have been published in popular magazines. All the games mentioned (including *Traveller*) are played with 15mm figures, and there are many different types available, as well as a variety of 15mm deck plans.

Finally, it is probable that one important new SFRPG will appear in 1984. This is *Ringworld*, based on the novels of Larry Niven and produced by *Chaosium*, the manufacturers of *RuneQuest*. □

Next issue: Modern-day horror to the wild west and the comic-world of superheroes.

The Name of the Game

A Beginner's Guide to Role-Playing Games by Marcus L Rowland

Part 4 of a series explaining what role-playing games are about and how to get started.

Previous articles explained the mechanics of role-playing, and looked at Fantasy and Science Fiction role-playing games. This last article examines some other types of games. For convenience they are grouped under generic headings.

FASTER THAN A SPEEDING BULLET – SUPERHERO GAMES

Most people dream of having secret powers, so it isn't surprising that some role-playing games are based on comics which feature superheroes.

Much of the fun of these games comes from effective role-playing. No red-blooded Superhero fights a Supervillain without a speech on ethics and the futility of crime, and few Supervillains will kill a Superhero without constructing an elaborate (and usually fallible) death trap, and indulging in some heavy gloating.

Champions – Hero Games

A point-allocation system makes it possible to generate characters without rolling dice, and the combat system accurately reflects the earth-shaking duels found in many comics.

Characters have eight prime requisites, all initially at a normal human rating of 10, then improved by paying Power Points. There are several figured characteristics, which can also be adjusted by paying the appropriate number of points. More points buy skills, powers (such as Flight or X-Ray Vision), and equipment.

Expenditure over 100 points must be countered by disadvantages like bad luck, personality problems, or dependent relatives who occasionally get involved in adventures.

The combat system is fairly complex, with many different types of attack and defence. Characters make a roll to hit, modified by values for skill, power ratings, and characteristics. Some or all of the attack is absorbed by the victim's defences, with any residue causing physical or mental harm. The calculations behind this process are moderately complex, but most of the hard work is done during the design process. Recovery is rapid, and the rules make most attacks survivable.

Champions is the most widely played superhero game, and is reasonably easy to learn and play. It is compatible with *Espionage* and *Autoduel Champions* (see below), and supported by supplements and scenarios. Available Material: Boxed Set (rules, scenario, dice); *Champions 2* (rules extensions etc); *Enemies I, II* (pregenerated villains); Scenarios.

Superworld – Chaosium Inc

Generation is by a point-allocation sys-



tem, in this case derived from randomly rolled characteristics resembling those of *RuneQuest*, and characters spend points to purchase enhanced characteristics, skills, or powers, and must buy off excess points by accepting disadvantages. The rules are more streamlined than those of *Champions*. Available Material: Boxed Set (rules, dice); *Bad Medicine for Dr Drugs* (scenario).

Villains and Vigilantes

– Fantasy Games Unlimited

The current edition suggests basing the characters' characteristics on those of the players, then adding randomly selected powers and skills. Players must reject one of the powers rolled, and accept one randomly-selected disadvantage. The combat system involves levels and a table cross-referencing powers and defences.

V&V is moderately complicated, but players with a little experience will find it reasonably easy to learn and play. Available Material: Boxed Set (rules, scenario); Rules only; *Opponents* (pregenerated villains); Scenarios.

Golden Heroes – Burley/Haines

This British game was originally available by mail order only, but it will be re-issued by *Games Workshop* in a professional format this month (July). Four prime requisites (Ego, Strength, Dexterity and Vigour) produce figured characteristics. Hits to kill and concussion are rolled separately, using 1d6 per point of Vigour. Each character has between 5 to 10 powers that are randomly selected. However, rather than roll a new power the player can choose to upgrade a

power the player already has, or select an advantageous background.

The current system involves several novel ideas of scenario and campaign conduct, which will be included in the new edition. The rules are fast and easily learned. No additional material is available, yet. Available Material: Boxed Set (rules, scenarios, dice).

MODERN DAY MYTHS – SPY RPG'S

Most RPG's involve an escapist element, and some of the most escapist fiction is set firmly in the modern world. Combining these elements produces the modern-day spy RPG.

Top Secret – TSR

This was the first spy RPG, featuring a character generation system resembling *D&D*. Prime requisites are generated randomly, then the character is assigned to an intelligence agency branch. Each branch fosters different skills (theft, assassination, etc), and skills improve as the character gains levels.

No rules expansions have been published, but scenarios are available. A good game for players wanting to convert from *D&D* with the minimum of trouble. Available Material: Boxed Set (rules, scenario, dice); Scenarios.

Espionage – Hero Games

Espionage is a new system, with character generation derived from the *Champions* rules and compatible with *Autoduel Champions*. The rules only cover CIA agents, but it seems likely that expansions will deal with other services, such as MI6 and the KGB.

A good game for referees familiar with *Champions*, and anyone wanting a slightly more realistic approach to spying. The design is slightly untidy, and may put off beginners who aren't familiar with *Champions*. Available Material: Boxed Set (rules, scenario, dice); *Border Crossing* (scenario).

James Bond, the Role Playing Game – Victory Games

This new game is a media spinoff, based on the 1980's conception of Fleming's hero. The emphasis is on gadgetry, girls, and guns, but the rules are well-designed, flexible and allow the development of characters in a variety of intelligence agencies. Several supplements and scenarios are available.

James Bond seems likely to dominate this RPG area, simply because of its name. It works well, and is reasonably easy to learn. Available Material: Boxed Set (rules, character sheets, dice); Rules only; Game Masters pack; Q manual (equipment); Scenarios (*Dr No*, *Goldfinger* etc).

CHALLENGING THE UNKNOWN – FANTASTIC ADVENTURERS

Several RPG's deal with man's desire to explore the unknown and explain the inexplicable. Characters like Doc Savage and Indiana Jones are popular because their adventures begin in a relatively normal world, but still contain elements of fantasy and ultimate horror.

Call of Cthulhu – Chaosium Inc

Set in the 1920's, *Call of Cthulhu* is probably the most horrific RPG available, being based on the Cthulhu Mythos of H.P. Lovecraft. Characters are investigators (professors, reporters, etc), who gradually uncover strange truths which will slowly drive them insane.

Briefly, the stories deal with a race of alien deities who ruled the world before the evolution of mankind. They still live, some exiled to space while others are trapped in crypts beneath the sea. Many other alien races lurk in the lost corners of the world, also bearing dark secrets. Various cults and mystics know that they exist, and try to use potent spells and sacrifices to control or worship them. Knowledge of these beings brings strange powers, and simultaneously drives the initiated insane.

At first characters have no knowledge of the Cthulhu Mythos, and are as sane as their characteristics will allow. Each brush with the forces of darkness adds to the character's knowledge of the Cthulhu Mythos and simultaneously lowers Sanity. If sanity is reduced by more than 20% in a single adventure, the character becomes insane; if sanity drops to zero the character can never be cured, and becomes an NPC (and probably a cultist).

This system is supported by a supplement and numerous adventures, and can be adapted to other eras and situations with no supernatural element. The rules are clear and suitable for beginners. Available Material: Boxed Set (2 rulebooks, sourcebook, etc); *The Cthulhu Companion* (rules expansions); Scenarios/Scenario collections.

Daredevils – Fantasy Games Unlimited

This game is set in the 1930's, and is based on the pulp adventures of characters like Doc Savage and the Shadow.

The complications of this game's character generation and combat systems make it unsuitable for beginners, but experienced players may enjoy it. Additional Material: Boxed Set (rulebook, 4 scenarios); Scenario collections.

Mercenaries, Spies, and Private Eyes – FBI

A present-day adventure game with a character generation system derived from *Tunnels and Trolls*, incorporating modern weapons and psionic powers. It is easily learned and run, and may suit beginners. Available Material: Rulebook, *Jade Jaguar* (solo scenario), *Stormhaven* (for *Espionage* as well).

After The Holocaust – Disaster Games

Games dealing with Earth after some natural or man-made disaster are a sub-species of science fiction RPG's. The period can be a few decades to several thousand years in the future, and the disaster can range from nuclear war to the energy crisis.

Car Wars – Steve Jackson Games

American civilisation has almost collapsed as fossil fuel reserves are exhausted. Powerful electrical vehicles (charged by nuclear reactors and alternative power sources) allow communication between towns, which have become armed enclaves besieged by marauding cycle gangs and outlaws. Most vehicles are armed and armoured, equipped with an array of machine guns, rocket launchers and flame throwers which would warm the heart of Mad Max. Vehicle combats have become a sport and a necessity for survival.

The basic game deals with vehicle design and combat, with character generation almost ignored. Two supplements, *Sunday Drivers*, and *Truck Stop*, cover character generation in more depth, and add rules for pedestrians and heavy vehicles. A recent innovation is *Autoduel Champions*, a publication converting the *Car Wars* vehicle design rules for use with *Champions* and *Espionage*, and adding super powers to the *Car Wars* rules.

While not a full RPG, *Car Wars* is an enjoyable system which allows limited character generation, and is easy to learn and play. Available Materials: Pocket Box Set (rules, counters, etc); *Sunday Drivers* (rules, counters, etc); *Truck Stop* (rules, counters, etc); *Expansion Sets* (road, counters, etc); *Autoduel Champions* (A4 Book).

Gamma World – TSR

Recently re-issued, *Gamma World* is set on Earth centuries after a disastrous nuclear war. Civilisation has collapsed, and semi-barbaric tribesmen must reconquer a wilderness populated by hostile tribes, mutants, and a few remaining robots. The game is similar to *D&D*, with characters accumulating points for level increases and collecting technological equipment to aid survival.

Gamma World is easy to learn and run. Available Material: Boxed Set (rules, map, etc); Scenarios.

Aftermath – FGU

Another post-holocaust game, set a few years after a nuclear war (or some other disaster). Character generation is complex and heavily orientated towards a survivalist ethos, with combat and weaponry the main factors in determining events. Available Material: Boxed Set (rules etc); Scenarios.

THE PAST IS ANOTHER COUNTRY – HISTORICAL GAMES

Most eras have been the subject of at least one RPG. Their number and diversity make it impossible to cover them all, but a few of the most popular follow.

Bushido – Fantasy Games Unlimited

Set in feudal Japan, *Bushido* uses a design system for character generation and attempts a realistic portrayal of the period while incorporating some mythical and magical elements.

FGU's usual attention to detail has made this game very popular, and the rules encourage role-playing instead of violence. Most aspects are easily learned, and the game is suitable for beginners. Available Material: Boxed Set (books, maps, charts, etc); Scenarios.

En Garde! – GDW

This game is set in the 17th and 18th centuries, and can be played without a referee. Characters are members (or potential members) of the French aristocracy, climbing through society and defeating rivals by intrigue or in duels.

A game which works well as a postal game or if all the players are moderately experienced. The absence of scenarios and direction by a referee sometimes slows play if the players are inexperienced. Available Material: Rulebook.

Boot Hill – TSR

A Western game of cowboys and outlaws, using level concepts and combat methods similar to *D&D*. Easily learned, and suitable for beginners. Available Material: Boxed Set (rules etc); Scenarios.

STARTING TO PLAY

Beginners sometimes have trouble finding other players, or learning more about the games they are thinking of buying. There are several solutions, all fairly easy:

1: Look for a local games club. Most magazines and fanzines publish advertisements, and most games shops have a notice board with club announcements. A reasonably large RPG club should have members with an interest in most available games, and give you a chance to try them before buying. Two warnings – don't get involved in campaigns unless you are sure that you will want to continue playing, and don't commit yourself to too many activities simultaneously. It's a good idea to find an introductory scenario or beginners campaign, if someone will run one. Most Universities have some sort of club, and many will admit outsiders.

2: If no club is available, try the personal adverts which are sometimes carried in magazines and on shop boards. Many other players have difficulty finding opponents.

3: Find out what the staff of games shops recommend – they usually try everything available.

4: Start your own club, or place your own advertisements. See if any of your friends are interested.

5: Visit one of the games fairs, like *Dragonmeet* or *Games Day*. It's usually possible to find any game being played at these events, though sometimes difficult to get a place and join in. Games fairs often auction second-hand games, which are sometimes real bargains.

6: Take a chance. Buy the game, and try it on your own. Roll up a few characters, and try out the combat system. See if there are any solo scenarios available. If you like the game, advertise for other players. If you don't, put it up for sale and see if the person who buys it has any games that might interest you.

Once you have started playing, keep an eye on the advertisements and news in games magazines. If a game is popular it's likely that supplements and scenarios will be published by the manufacturer or by independent groups. It's also likely that articles and scenarios will be published. Read what's written for other systems, since it's likely that you can adapt some aspects for your own use. Read the letters, and keep a look out for other players in your area. □