

TURKEY TROT

TURKEY TROT #1 is the creation of Arnie Katz, 59 Livingston St., Apt. 6B, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11201. It is intended for Alarums & Excursions #21. Publication date: 3/9/77

Gobble, Gobble I was already intrigued by the D&D concept when my wife Joyce gave me a set of the basic rules about 16 months ago. I've read science fiction and fantasy and played games about as long as I can remember -- I'm 30 now -- so a combination of both sounded delightful.

Unfortunately, no one I knew had even heard of D&D, much less played it. I decided that the best way to stimulate local interest would be to actually dig a dungeon. I bought the supplements, got a few issues of A&E and was beginning to grasp the rules when the press of other business relegated my Dungeons & Dragons paraphernalia to a desk drawer.

There the stuff hibernated through most of 1976. I still searched for a local dungeon, but finding none, tended to let matters slide.

Quite recently, I was cleaning my desk -- something I like to do every half-decade whether it needs it or not -- and found the stack of D&D material buried under some files of freelance writing sources. Before I could slide the drawer shut, I fell victim to its "charm Arnie" spell and was re-interested. I sounded out a few friends and found them willing to try this strange pastime if I could get it into playable shape.

With that incentive, I formulated a provisional set of "house rules," compiled some comprehensive charts and, of course, designed part of a labyrinth. The result, which I have dubbed "The Sarkonia Campaign," is still crude and narrow in scope, but it was sufficiently advanced to allow us to actually start playing the game at last.

I lose my D&D virginity However much one may cringe at a campaign involving a neophyte DM and equally novice players, it came down to a choice of that or nothing. So it was that on Saturday, February 12, a nervous Arnie Katz refereed the first descent into his dungeon by a party with characters handled by Joyce Katz, Bill Kunkel, Charlene Kunkel and Ross Chamberlain.

This sink-or-swim introduction to DMing taught me a lot, most notably that I have a long way to go before acquiring even a semblance of the expertise routinely displayed by A&E's leading lights. Even after several additional adventures, I'm still a jittery and erratic dungeonmaster, but the players claim to be having a great time and a regular series of expeditions is expected.

The adventures thus far have not really been notable enough to bear retelling in A&E, but you can bet we novices found them pretty thrilling. My own evaluation of the first descent is that the party hauled out a little too much magic and not quite enough treasure. However, the magic was carried into battle by enemies and none of it is above the +1 unintelligent sword level, so there's no real harm done.

If I had to pick my stupidest mistake on that first expedition, it would be no contest, though I didn't pick up on it until the following Monday while riding home on the subway. (Incidentally, the subway is the closest approach to "live" D&D I know of.) I was blissfully contemplating what my Fine Mind had wrought the previous Saturday when I happened to conjure a mental image of a particularly vivid mental image of a key encounter.

I could see the intrepid band of adventurers in my mind's eye as if it were a scene from a movie. As I admired this tableau, however, a feeling came over me that something was wrong. I puzzled over this for awhile, until I realized that Helmut, Bill's FMI, was wielding a mighty two-handed sword (yes, he has high strength) and carrying a shield at the same time. Oh, yes. (Before you all die laughing, let me recoup some small trifle of my self-respect by pointing out that this violation of D&D could seem no worse to you than the monthly rape of the English language perpetrated by some of A&E's contributors seems to me in my aspect of professional writer and editor.)

Pity the poor innocent One of my (many) DMing problems has been handling player -- and character -- knowledge of my campaign's monsters and treasures. I very deliberately did not provide lists of nasties and goodies to the players and, since no one has bought the books, there's no one around to identify creatures and loot when encountered. So when Helmut picks up a ring, he hasn't the slightest idea what it might be -- and neither does Bill Kunkel (who has quickly emerged as our best player, incidently.).

My question is: how do you communicate information about monsters and treasures to the characters and/or their players in your campaign? If you use some form of assaying system, who does the evaluating, by what method and at what price?

To expand on this point just a little more. Let's say that our FMI Helmut finds a ring which I, the DM, have determined is +1 protection. When he goes into battle, would you at that time inform Helmut that he is wearing a ring of protection and, if so, would you also tell him that it was +1 (as opposed to being an undefined plus)? If you would not just hand out this valuable information, by what methods could Helmut be able to learn the exact properties of his ring in your campaign?

I realize this will strike the hardcore D&Ders of A&E as pretty basic stuff, but I hope you'll indulge a poor-but-honest ~~that~~ novice in this instance, at least.

MAGIC While recognizing the ingenuity and value of the many spell point and klutz factor magic systems which have been presented in A&E and the Wild Hunt, my personal bent is toward keeping complexity with bounds, even at the loss of enhanced realism. (Sarkonia's players are not normally gamers and too much elaboration of rules would only end up scaring them off, I fear.)

The reasons for magic-limiting systems are so obvious as to need no repetition here, but I felt that the easy-to-use Gyax system was too restrictive for the campaign I wanted to run. The system I use keeps the MUs from running out of magic (as is quite common in straight Gyax games, I understand, particularly with low levels), yet it keeps a character from doing things like throwing 20 sleep spells in the same encounter.

What I do is allow MUs and Clerics to select spells per Gyax, but allow them to use the same spell again after an interval. The longer the interval, the better chance the reused spell has to work and the less chance that it will misfire or backfire. Practically speaking, it is impossible to reuse a spell within 10 minutes and, since my melee rounds are only 10 seconds, it will be rare to see an MU reuse a spell against the same foe. My rationale is that spellcasting affects the brain as exposure to bright light affects the retina. The act of casting creates a kind of mental "blindspot" which has to wear off before the same spell can be reused.

And that's it for my first D&D fanzine! See you next month.

-- Arnie Katz