

FANTASY GAMING VIA COMPUTER

by Corey S. Cole

One of the first thoughts a computerist has after discovering Fantasy Gaming is, "How could I do that on a computer?" Many of these individuals have gone a step farther, and, as a result, there are a large number of fantasy-type games available on any popular computer system (whether home or mainframe). These games tend to be oriented towards either puzzle-solving (with specific answers generally required) or hack-and-slash adventuring, as computers tend to make dull role-players.

A third way computers are used for fantasy gaming is as "gamemaster aids". Examples of this type are programs which randomly generate characters, monsters, treasure, or even complete dungeons, according to criteria supplied by the gamemaster. I played for a short while in a game which was entirely computer-generated; glitches came up now and again, but the gamemaster was left free to concentrate on the interesting parts of the game, such as role-playing the monsters.

The original, and still among the best, puzzle-solving computer FG is "Adventure", written by Woods and Crowther at MIT somewhere around the dawn of history. The object in Adventure is to accumulate as many of the treasures in Colossal Cavern as possible, and to store them away safely in the well-hidden, above. The catch is that some of the treasures are well-hidden, and nearly all have some puzzle to solve before you can retrieve them. For example, you cannot even reach the main part of the caverns until you have defeated a Huge Green Snake which blocks the way. I'll give you a clue — you can't fight it. The game is played by entering one- and two-word commands (for instance, you could say "GO NORTH", or "EAT FOOD"); a big part of the game is trying to guess what the computer's vocabulary is.

The disadvantage of Adventure is also an advantage, in some senses. Colossal Cavern is always the same, so you can "die", yet still accumulate information which will help you in the next game. This means that the game can essentially be discarded after you have solved the final puzzle. Fortunately, you will get quite a number of hours of enjoyment out of Adventure before that final puzzle is solved.

Once you have become a "Grandmaster" at Adventure, you will wish to find new challenges. This can be accomplished with the spate of "Adventure-like" games now on the market. The first of these is called "Zork", and is (to the best of my knowledge) only available on mainframe and mini-computers, due to its huge size. Zork features several improvements over Adventure — one is that you may use full sentences as commands. Zork also has a much larger vocabulary than Adventure. Scott Adams is the founder of a company called "Adventure, International", which publishes a large number of Adventure-like games for the Apple, Radio Shack, PET, and other major home computer systems.

As for the hack-and-slash type, the earliest examples I know of were several "dungeon games" which appeared on the PLATO computer system at the University of Illinois, within a year after the first publication of the original Dungeons and Dragons rules. As it happens, one of these was my first introduction to fantasy gaming in general. PLATO is a Computer-Assisted Instruction system, which makes it ideal for game-playing as well (both are enhanced by good graphics, good facilities for "English-like language", animation, and the ability to act as intermediary between several users at once; PLATO is excellent in all of these areas).

I had the habit of checking into the "Talkomatic" program any time I had been away from the system for a while, chatting with other users, and asking about new games. On one such occasion, I was told to try out something entirely different, a "dungeon" game. The player began as a first-level, multi-class character (Fighter/Magic-User/Cleric), with minimal equipment. As the character moves through a maze (always the same, but secret doors can be in different locations from game to game), he encounters monsters which he must fight, and occasionally finds treasure or a magic item (sound familiar?). Should he make it out safely, the character and his booty are stored on the computer disk, so that the player can use the same one the next time he plays.

I was thrilled, and thoroughly impressed by the imagination of whoever had come up with this game (it was over two years later that I discovered it to be based on an existing "paper" game, called Dungeons and Dragons). I'm afraid the Mathematics and Political Science lessons I had been writing didn't change much over the next several past-midnight sessions! The game seemed a bit tame, compared to the real-time action of Airfight, Conquest, and Spasim (a 3-dimensional space game, written by Jim Bowery with the aid of an NSF grant for studying 3-D graphics on computers); but this was not necessarily a bad thing, considering the response time delays when playing them from California.

I eventually lost access to PLATO (heart-breaking), but have since met plenty of other games in the Fantasy genre. My PET, for instance, has one called "Dungeon of Death", in which the object is to make it to the bottom of the dungeon, retrieve the Holy Grail, defeat Smaug the Dragon, and get back out alive. This game was fun for about the first dozen playings; I kept going until I'd won a couple of times out of sheer perversity.

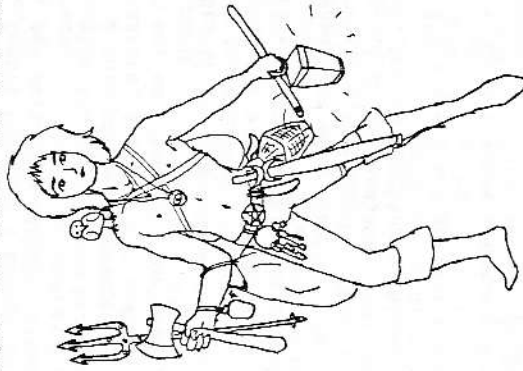
The one that currently has me hooked is called "Rogue"; as far as I know, it is only available on large-scale computers, although it should be relatively easily adaptable to smaller machines. In Rogue, you are an applicant for membership in the town Fighters' Guild. As an initiation test, the Guild supplies you with a set of Elvish ring mail armor (+1), and a magic Mace (+1 to hit and damage), and sends you off to the Dungeon. You are told to find the Amulet of Yendor, a powerful artifact hidden somewhere within the aforementioned Dungeon.

You head down the stairs, and start meeting all sorts of Fearsome Beesties, some of which have special abilities (Giant Ants drain Strength, Rust Monsters destroy armor, etc.). You also find occasional piles of gold pieces, other types of armor and weapons, and various magical items (Potions, Scrolls, Rings, Wands, Staves, and Rods). Unfortunately, you can't tell what they do. Potions are described by color, scrolls by their titles, rings by the gem set in them, and the sticks by the wood or metal they are made of. These are determined randomly at the beginning of each game, but remain constant throughout a game. Hence, once you have identified, say a green potion as being a Potion of Healing, all green potions you find will be healing potions. However, if you die or quit, and start over, the green potions might be poisonous instead.

Oh, did I forget to mention the Cursed items? Around two out of every three magic item types will be helpful in some fashion, but many are cursed, and rather annoying. So, if you wait until you are in a life-or-death situation to try zapping the Troll with your Cedar Staff, you might end up winning (Staff of Flame, perhaps), hastening your defeat (Haste Monster, say), or wasting a round in the middle of a combat (Light, perhaps). One of the scroll types is "Identify", but even it doesn't tell you everything (just whose "life" does that Wand of Drain Life drain, for instance; what does a Rod of Cancellation cancel; how do you use a Scroll of Scare Monster — reading it doesn't seem to do anything; etc.).

The game is nearly impossible to win; I have done so once in more games than I care to confess, and am apparently one of about a dozen people to have done so (no one else at work has managed it, though several have come close). What, then, is the thrill of a game in which you nearly always die ignominiously? Well, part of it is the Score Table which is displayed at the end of each game; it gives players something to measure their achievements against. Another is the sheer difficulty, itself; the attempt to "beat the odds" without putting any actual money on the table (I take that back; one of the major causes of delay in Spell Book publication is an editor too busy playing Rogue). Most important, perhaps, is trying to maximize your survival chances by testing magic items at appropriate times, and by making creative use of them, and other strategies, in critical situations. The monsters are graded by toughness, so that you hit progressively more dangerous ones as you proceed deeper into the dungeon, although there is always a chance of a lesser creature being encountered. As in D&D, no two games of Rogue are quite alike.

Is there any lasting value to Computer Fantasy Games, or are they just a waste of people's time? There are of course some therapeutic value to such entertainment in an age of pressure, but these games have other uses as well. Some of the programming techniques developed for Zork's English-Language (oh, sorry to be chauvinistic; I also have a French version of Adventure, and I'm sure there are others) have led to major advances in the field of "artificial intelligence", particularly in the area of language translation programs. From a personal standpoint, writing a computer game is one of the best ways of learning how to program, or of a specific programming language or system. Unfortunately, any game which is written eventually gets played, something which I suspect is not especially productive. Oh, well, if I weren't playing computer games, I'd probably be wasting my time in some other way (non-computer fantasy games, perhaps? At least those have some socially redeeming value in teaching creativity and problem-solving). So, beware the Evil Computer Fantasy Game!



The Practical Programming Song

by Corey S. Cole

(Tune: Sir William Gower — traditional)

D G C Am D

I'm a programmer, I work all day; D

But I work my hardest when I'm at play, G Am C D

At C-R-T or on a T-T-Y; A C D

If my boss asks me, I always lie! G C Am D

I'm an Adventurer, both stout and strong,

At the modem link I sit all day long,

Fight dwarves and snakes green, that stand in my way,

There's even a dragon which I must slay.



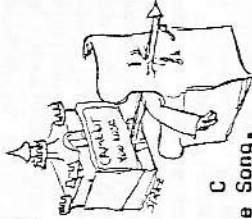
Ironing out the bugs

SONGS TO PLAY COMPUTER GAMES BY

The Tron, Pong, Donkey Kong, Arcade Song
by Lori Ann Cole

(Tune: On Top of Old Smokey)

C F
I went to an Arcade, to play for some fun,
I lost all my money, before I was done.
I thought in an Arcade, you couldn't go wrong,



Now I'll sing the Tron, Pong, Donkey Kong Arcade Song.

The Invaders attacked me, destroyed all my ships,
They bombed all my bases, and my landing strips.
They're coming to get me, twenty Klingons I scan,
So I'm going to quit now, and switch to Pacman.

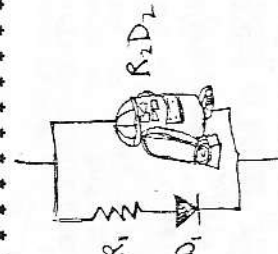
I then played Ms. Pacmen, with the cute little bow,
But Blinky soon caught me, I turn corners too slow.
I put in my quarter, to Venture, its lair,
But a Hall monster caught me, as I came off the stair.

I whirled in my spaceship, hit the big ship also,
Then an Asteroid hit me, three times in a row.
King Kong kept me jumping, but I didn't get far,
And when I played Star Trek, I crashed into the star.

So if you have money, Please heed what I said.
Don't go to an Arcade, invest it instead.
I've lost all my money, all I do is lose,
So I've got the Tron, Pong, Donkey Kong Arcade Blues.

(PRACTICAL PROGRAMMING SONG continued)

The game of Rogue always brings me joy,
So here's a flask raised to Michael Toy,
Dungeoneer's duties, I would not shirk,
So I play his game both at home and work.
Wizardry's great for those who are bold,
My friends tell stories of wealth untold,
But you need an Apple to taste its wares,
So I cannot climb down its golden stairs.



Oh, Zork has tests that match all of these,
Its puzzles built up on linked-list trees.
A lexical scanner it does employ,
Which makes it more than a gamer's toy.

WHY WOULD ANYONE BE A DM?
-- TWO VIEWS

by Richard Aronson and Lori Ann Cole

by Richard Aronson

Why does one dungeon-
master? This question is at
the heart of every campaign,
determining the motivations
behind the person behind the
game. I was asked this
question recently by my
fiancee, and I thought long and
hard about it; after all, the
players never do the right
thing, etc. So why do I DM? I
have the answer: NPC's! Yes,
only as the GameMaster do I
ever get the confluence of
favorable rolls to permit me to
have bards, monks, and other
specialized classes. I have
never in my life rolled a
druid, a ranger, an assassin,
or a Paladin in the AD&D
system, and only once have I
rolled an illusionist. There
are people out there who can
consistently roll 306 and get
17's [we call them O'Delle],
but my highest level character
started with an average
characteristic [over 8 dice
rolls] of 7.25. But as DM I
can avoid rolling dice
altogether! I decree a bard;
who is going to argue that
there are not a significant
quantity on the bell-shaped
curve who qualify for bards [or
any other class]. Of course,
this leads to the concept that
I am gaming to play with
myself, but we'll discuss the
concept of DM as Narcissus some
other time.

By the way, all you DM's
who have Significant Others
[boy/girl-friends, spouses, or
whatever] in your campaigns,
heed this warning. My
fiancee's Elven character was

by Lori Ann Cole

What makes a good dungeon
in my opinion? A good dungeon
is one that is challenging, but
logical, entertaining, and
amusing. It should test the
skills of all the character
types evenly, balancing
fighting and magic with
thieving and Clerical spells.
It should require the players
to use their brains frequently,
yet permit the characters to
interact with each other, for
this is a role-playing game,
after all.

What makes a good Dungeon
Master? A good DM has the
wisdom of Solomon, the charisma
of Saruman, the patience of
Shelob, the improvisational
abilities of Robin Williams,
and the humor and wit of
Groucho Marx and Mark Twain.
He, she, or it runs good
dungeons, is reasonable and
fair about decisions, but is
consistent. The DM must be
able to balance treasure with
the work it took to obtain it,
the occasional bad luck of
random chance with some good
luck, and the "rules" of the
game with the play-ability of
the game. The DM must enjoy
the game.

Assuming you meet the above
qualifications, why be a
Dungeon Master? Well, except
for the absolute control over
the lives of half a dozen or so
characters [being Ghod], the
chance to show off one's
immeasurable talent for the
theatre [hammering it up] or
being fawned upon and asked for
autographs [this does not occur

"Birth of a Hobbit"

The Only Good Thief is a Guild Thief

How many times must I tell you - Five Kings don't beat four Aces because there aren't five Kings in a deck!

Thou shalt not steal Here!

By HERMES! I'm surrounded by total incompetents: A fumble-fingered pickpocket, a gambler who counts 1, 2, 3, many... a bungler burglar who always gets off scot-free... If that weren't enough, some homicidal MU is flying left, right and left.

Do unto Others BEFORE they do unto you

The only thing this inept outfit doesn't have to screw things up is a hobby. Just because they read some trashy novel about some hobbit burglar, the overweight, underexercised fool thinks he can be a thief, too!

The Buck Stops Here!

What Now?!

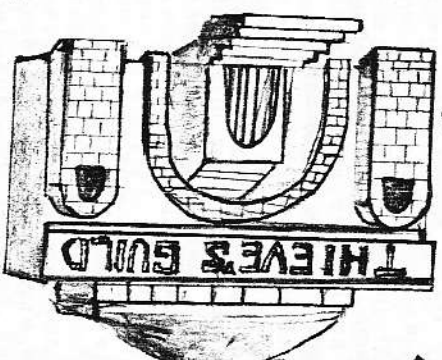
Excuse me, sir, a new Applicant...

Good fences make Good Pavers

Why me?

Cops on the take around here!

We don't like to talk about it!



Here we are on the steps of a great adventure. Don't know why I didn't do this years ago - the dull life of Master Magic User to Master Thief is such a nice change!

Speaking of change... Mind using some dull magic to return me to my own inconspicuous self, oh Masters?

Alakazam! Close, but not exactly inconspicuous!

Zamakazow!

That's a little better. I was pigging to fee like a Sumatran!

Our Build Guide is returning - Aren't you going to turn me invisible?

No time - Pretend you're a hat!

The things I do for my familiar!

[WHY BE A D.M. continued — Richard Aponson / Lori Ann Cole]

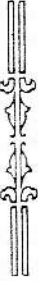
relatively new to the campaign, and one of the other players used an alignment detection ability on her, asking "Is she good?" My reply, "Well, she's okay" got me in quite a doghouse; don't say I didn't warn you.

But I digress. Non-player characters, more than any other single factor, define the flavor of the campaign. For one thing, humanoids are the most dangerous opponents around. An extreme example could have 20 low-level characters with composite bows; no mage will ever be able to affect more than two or three per mace round, if they are spread out, even if he gets initiative on them. And, after that, the 40 arrows a round will disrupt most spells. That same mage, at a distance of 200 yards, could kill most dragons by getting off two lightning bolts before the dragon got close enough to breathe (we hypothesize a middling high-level mage, of course). The use of spells makes humanoid and psionically-endowed creatures the worst to deal with, and they make up the bulk of the NPC's in your campaign. So, how do you control them?

First, make them busy. Players are mean! They'll take this nifty, nasty trap that you spent hours designing so that they will have to be in top form to disarm it; call in their buddy, Joe NPC, Wizard, and bye-bye trap! It's indignant, it is. So make your NPC's busy. Make them brusque — "Yeah kid, so it's probably trapped; well, I can't get away from the office right now, so go ahead. If you die, I promise I'll get you raised." Make them nasty — give them

frequently), there is not much of a reward for it. The DM must put up with a lot. You have to deal with the neophytes who don't know how to play the game, the turkeys who don't know how to play period, and the egotist who thinks he knows how to play better than you do (How can he, this is your world and rules, after all?) You've got the player whose sole philosophy of playing is Crush, Kill, Destroy, and Loot, pillage, and Rape (Who cares about all the nifty clues the DM spent hours designing into the dungeon, lets go whomp some monsters!). Then there is the player who plays every thief as an assassin, and always tries to rob and kill off the party (1st level thief tries to pickpocket 11th level Paladin — Ritual Hari-Kari?) When after a difficult fight with serious casualties, you try to give the players a chance by having some of the monsters not get involved, there's always some 1st level MU who decides to throw a Magic Missile at your innocent bystander Troll. And so on.

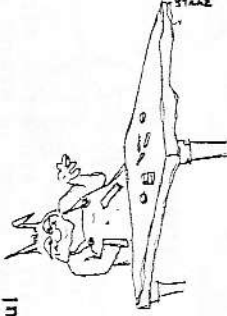
But then there is the game where the party acts as a team. They solve the puzzles and think before rushing into battle -- they even use Strategy! They rationalize the kinks in your logic for you. They take your puns and throw back better ones. They play the game the way you intended the game to be played. All at once, the distinction between DM and player breaks down -- you are all playing for a common goal, and having fun at it. That is why one becomes a DM -- because one loves to play the game.



unpleasant personal problems. Think the party is going to run up to Joe the Wizard at every opportunity if, every time they come, you give them a graphic description of the vivisection he's performing? Betcha the squeamish members of the party quash unnecessary visits to Joe.

Make them evil, or mercenary, or best of all, make them all knowing. Sure, I don't have 18 Intelligence, but some of the wizards in my world do; let them figure out stuff that the party tries to obscure. Let them identify magic items and grossly underpay for them ("That +1 sword you've got there? I'll give you 2600 g.p. for it." The players will never know that it's a Luck Blade with three wishes on it).

But make them balanced. In a campaign situation, the players, at first, are going to be a very small factor in the great balance-of-power equation. But, if the "good's are overwhelmingly more powerful than the "evil's, then why is any evil still around? And vice versa. I'll continue this topic next issue. Be seeing you!



WANDERER by Jim Chamings

The Wanderer (he had no other name) rode down the hill in his usual posture. Head erect, back straight, an overall perfect riding position. And he had his bow.

He was riding in the jungle. Though the foliage was thick, the way parted before him, disobeying Sunda, goddess of Nature, and Natural Law. And Wanderer had his bow.

Suddenly, he tensed. His bow was ready to shoot in one swift, unseeable movement. An arrow broke out of the thicket, landing in Wanderer's heart. He pulled it out. No blood flowed from the wound, but the tip of the arrow began to turn crimson. A scream broke from the wood.

"Men! Release the Azonni!" another voice barked.

Wanderer had battled this monster before. It had been a formidable foe. But he was ready. He had his bow.