

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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Ham Acting Across a Table

By Ed Greenwood

How and where and when did the Forgotten Realms start? What's at the heart of Ed Greenwood's creation, and how does the Grand Master of the Realms use his own world when he runs D&D adventures for the players in his campaign? "Forging the Forgotten Realms" is a new weekly feature wherein Ed answers all those questions and more.

When you get right down to it, the Realms isn't geography, it's people. Imaginary people. Characters such as Drizzt, and Elminster, and the local tavernmaster or turnip merchant.

Characters mean acting—players and DMs speaking for such characters, describing what the characters do, momentarily *being* those characters.

"Roleplaying," to my generation. "Ham acting," my father's called it.

So why put on funny voices and make melodramatic speeches? ("And it is I—!!—who shall have encompassed his doom! Bwahahahahaha!") Why not just do the NASA commentator thing? ("The fighter moves away from the chest, backs toward the door. Drawing sword now . . . over to you . . .")

Well, it's because of the payoff—the memories. Life is all about building a collection of memories.

Great gaming moments—from board games or card tournaments, immersive online battles or highlights in fantasy roleplaying campaigns that literally last decades—are great shared memories.

Which is why they shine for every gamer who wants to tell you about something his or her character did, but don't shine so much for you when you hear one of them telling you about it. You weren't there; it isn't *your* shared memory.

Yet for those who do share such a moment, it's no less powerful because it was "just" a game, a moment of shared make-believe, than if it had been real.

Soldiers form very close bonds with those they directly served with. As do campers, with those they went to summer camp with, when young. Any individuals who go through travail or intense experience together, and must stand together, end up forging some measure of trust, of shared experience, of "You got my back, so I'll get yours."

Gamers do this, even if their characters are elves and dwarves battling imaginary monsters with spells that don't really exist, in a land of crumbling castles they will never actually visit. Let me tell you about the time we took down Asmodeus . . .

Gamers' dreams, like a reader's dreams, can take them anywhere.

In a fantasy game, anyone can be the tallest and most beautiful character, even the poorest youngster can be the wealthiest and most powerful emperor, and so on.

All helped along by everybody being ham actors around the gaming table.

Sure, the line between enjoying a commonly spun shared illusion and the hilariously ridiculous, wherein everyone guffaws at bad Monty Python imitations and misused overblown heroic lines quoted from the latest movie, is a fine one, and drawn in a different place for everyone. I suspect we've all experienced the huge hairy guy who can't resist trying to trill and flute in a mock little-girl voice because he's playing a female pixie, or someone of similar sort.

Yet undeniably, when friends who game together settle into a style that works for them, and speak as their

characters (even if that's as far as the acting goes), the memories they build together are richer than if they approach a D&D session as a strategy game in which rules are often consulted and discussed, where the rules and the DM are adversaries to be beaten.

In most Realmsplay for which I've been the DM, I've managed to establish a style wherein, except for obvious "player to player" moments ("Pass the chips, will you?") or "player to DM" speech ("My character's lived here all his life, so have I ever seen this particular merchant before?"), every player speaks in character.

This style of play is, in a very real sense, the main reason why the Realms is so detailed. I've always looked across my gaming table at players who wanted to know everything, and were willing to peer inside everywhere to find out that everything.

Which meant there was no way I could pick up a bottled adventure, my own or anyone else's, and railroad the characters through it. I needed to have the entire darned world "sort of" ready, so my players could roleplay, in character, a "council of war" whenever they felt the desire to, and work out for themselves where their characters would go and what they'd do during the rest of the play session.

If the characters are to truly be heroes, and impose their will on the world instead of just reacting to whatever I throw at them, they must make the decisions. After all, if they're just fulfilling a destiny preordained by the gods, or by the sword they drew from some stone, or the ring they were foolish enough to put on, where's the heroism?

Frodo's heroism doesn't come from inheriting a ring; it comes from his deciding to take that ring to Mount Doom to destroy it, into certain great danger, though he doesn't even know the way. Any life is made up of a series of moral choices, and a fulfilling roleplaying campaign offers its players plenty of them, from heat-of-the-battle tactical considerations to "Who shall be king?" or "As king, how do I decide this? Or that?" (Ever notice how quickly, on the job, any real-world American president starts to look older?)

Which of course means I have to give my players a huge buffet of choices, some of them pressures ("day jobs" for characters to pay the bills, mysterious people spying on them or attacking them, various NPCs trying to manipulate or even frame them, and so on) to build excitement. Yet I can't overdo the pressure, or the game isn't much "relief" from real life.

And I must make the places seem real, the crises seem real, and the NPCs seem real; the more real all of those elements seem to the players, the more the imaginary achievements of their characters seem real, and the more satisfaction they glean from the game.

They want to care about what they do. Like everyone else in the world, they want their deeds and achievements to *matter*.

Things matter more when they "feel real."

And "real" comes down, in the end, to ham acting across the gaming table. Not that you should necessarily do what I've done, or advocate it. The acting is *not* about "look at me," and DMs should resist the urge to indulge in histrionics because they happen to be portraying a blustering tyrant, a gloating beholder, or a menacing dragon—unless their players really love it when they perform in such a way. It's not about being the star actor, it's about entertaining the players.

Which is why the style of play, and exactly what the DM does, is—has to be—slightly different with each gaming group, and from play session to play session with the same gaming group (if everyone's tired or cranky when they assemble for a play session, their collective mood will be different from when all gather fresh and eager).

So take all of this with much salt. And (ahem) now let me tell you about the time we took down Asmodeus. . . .



About the Author

Ed Greenwood is the man who unleashed the *Forgotten Realms* setting on an unsuspecting world. He works in libraries, and he writes fantasy, science fiction, horror, mystery, and romance stories (sometimes all in the same novel), but he is happiest when churning out Realmslore, Realmslore, and more Realmslore. He still has a few rooms in his house in which he has space left to pile up papers.

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