

A new game with a familiar name

by Frank Mentzer

This summer and fall, TSR will release the newest version of the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® game, revisions of the current Basic and Expert Sets.

"Again?" groans the hobby gamer, having seen the original "brown box" or white box" set evolve into the "blue book" edition which became the latest "red book" set.

"This one is different!" I reply.

"So were the others!" retorts the gamer. "Why change it again?"

Why indeed?

First and foremost: With the old set, you had to find someone to show you how to play. If you merely bought the rules and tried to learn. . . . Well, all kidding aside and facing the brutal, blunt truth, the big problem was that after buying the game, you couldn't learn to play.

A few experienced gamers could (and did) learn the game from the rules, but they were rare. While this fact would be fatal to the sales of an ordinary new game, it proved to be a minor obstacle in the case of the D&D® game. It was offset by a devoted following, people who

taught newcomers the ways of role-playing; it was bypassed by the extraordinary nature of this new type of gaming, and its incredible impact on the hobby. And so it grew, essentially unchanged, for years; one major effort to reorganize this mass of evolving, growing game data was made by the noted author J. Eric Holmes, who edited the 1978 "blue book" edition.

And the game inspired others. The man known as EGG (either E. Gary Gygax or Excellent Good Guy, depending on your point of view) wrote the detailed, highly technical ADVANCED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® game. Many other fantasy role-playing games appeared, dealing with the topic in a variety of ways. Other topics were also addressed; we now see a wide spectrum of topics: wild west, science fiction, science fantasy, spies and espionage, gangsters, and other themes in role-playing form.

Enough of history; why another edition of the D&D game? Simply, the previous editions were not revisions. They were new attempts at using the same methods of organization applied to the original

data plus evolution. They were not "revised," merely "reorganized." This one is different.

For openers, you can play the game alone. That's a big step forward in itself; up to now, you had to have someone to run it, and someone else to play it. TSR is working on solo modules to support this technique; the M-1 module is already out. (Yes, I realize that other FRP games can be played solo. Agreed, this is just for openers. Stay with me.)

Secondly, you can start playing without learning the rules. (Huh?) There are two booklets in the set, one for beginning players and the other for novice Dungeon Masters. Everyone starts with the Players Guide; it begins with a tale about a fighter. You pretend that you're this character, and he/she comes equipped, ready to go.

During the adventure, many things happen - a giant snake bites you, a cleric is found; the cleric cures you, explains a few things, and turns some undead. An impassable locked door shows the need for a thief, and a magic-user attacks you in the grand finale. And by the time the story ends, you've seen how most of the game system works. You haven't read pages of rules, and you haven't been swamped by charts and tables; you've merely read an entertaining fantasy story.

From that point, the booklet explains how to use a character sheet, describing each part. Then you can start another adventure - but for this one, you make the decisions. A small dungeon setting contains a variety of monsters, tricks and traps, incorporating an easy introduction to mapping. By the time you're done, you know how to play, when and what to roll, and so forth. Lastly, the Players Guide explains how to play in groups, a few more options for your character, and pre-made characters of other types.

The Dungeon Master's Rulebook builds on what you learn in the Players Guide. To play in a group, the new DM uses a step-by-step adventure given there; it includes what things you should say and ask, and when and what to roll. A later section called "Procedures" covers most details that are needed. The DM rulebook also contains the "usual" monsters and treasures, gives a complete first level dungeon with maps for the rest (and guidelines for filling it), and explains how to make more dungeons.

Of course, it took a lot more than the previous 64 pages to do all this; it took over 100, counting both booklets. For financial reasons, the module had to go; EGG's "Keep on the Borderlands" is not

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in the revised edition, nor is any other module. But the "play value" remains; the solo and group adventures offer great amounts of playing time, and were designed specifically to help you learn to play. And with the redesigned set, more purchasers will be able to use the rules in the first place. We could have kept the module in and kicked the price up, but we'd like to keep the cost down where everyone can afford it.

It's not really a set for experienced gamers. It's for those friends of yours, the ones who just haven't gotten around to trying the game. It's for that younger (or older!) brother or sister who might like to try it, or even for parents, (Hey, parents are people, too. They might want to understand those terms you keep using, like "a-cee" and "hit points" and so forth. Don't expect them to play as often as you do, or necessarily as well; but if they read the new Basic Set, they might surprise you!) This set is for the non-gamer novices who might play a few card games or board games, but who seem to think that role-playing is too complicated. Well, it is a lot more complex than Old Maid, but it's a heckofalot simpler than it used to be - with the revised D&D Basic Set.

The artwork is outrageously good. I remember seeing those cute little sketches in the Original set, and the "great new pictures" in the "blue book"; and the

"red book" was even better. Well, hang on to your eyeballs, because a couple of guys named Larry Elmore and Jeff Easley did most of the art in the Players Manual. Elmore's the guy who did the cover for DRAGON® magazine (issue #62) showing the paladin facing the three orcs, with the mountains in the background . . . state-of-the-art fantasy graphics. He also did the covers for the first few ENDLESS QUEST™ Books. And Mr. Easley is about three brush hairs behind Mr. Elmore in quality, and moving up fast.

And we've got a new department at TSR, a group called "Product Finishing." In the old days, we just slapped the games on paper as best we could, and rolled 'em out the door. But the big-time game makers do it right; they make the games as pretty as they are playable. The best chefs make food look as good as it tastes; it then tastes even better (a bit of applied psychology). This applies to everything that people buy; we like to buy pretty things. In the publishing biz, there are professionals at this sort of thing, called "Product Finishing" people. So they got to work on Basic and figured out ways to make it all look delicious.

I changed almost nothing in the actual Basic game rules. The spell progressions for clerics and magic-users were a little lopsided, so I fixed those, but they'll only affect Expert-level play and up. I inverted the game mechanic for "opening doors";

now they open on 5-6 (on 1d6), and you just add your strength bonus to the roll. So minor things like that have been changed, for easier play, but the rest stands. It's just presented differently, a bite at a time, until you find that you've digested the whole thing, and it's easy. Or at least edible.

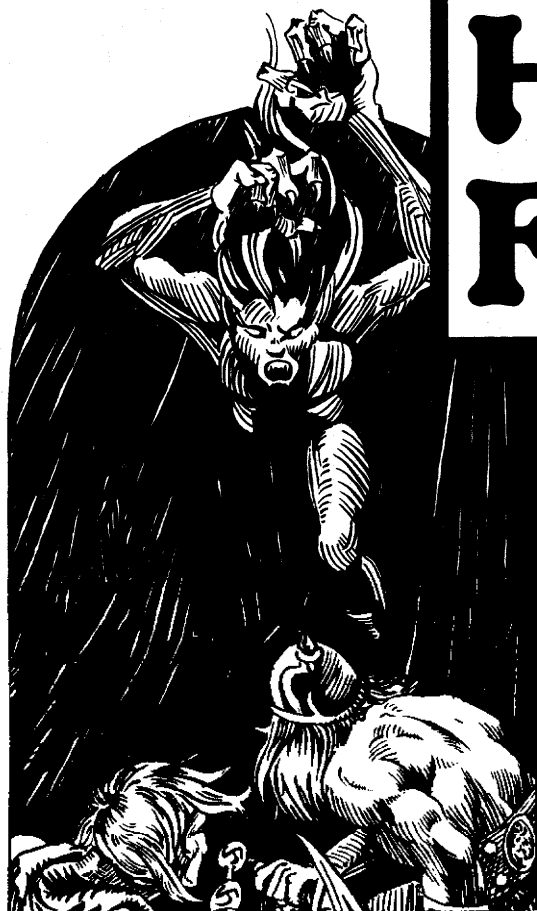
The D&D Expert Set should be out in late summer or early autumn. I took the fantasy world from module X-1, as described by Dave "Zeb" Cook, shook it once or twice, and got the basis for a fantasy world for the whole D&D game system. (You could call Zeb a game designer, much as you could call an artifact a "magic item"; technically correct, but not

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forceful enough. With a foundation like his, the thing almost builds itself.)

The Expert Set includes spells and character details for levels 4-14. It describes a "Home Town" for the characters, and gives a few plot outlines for DMs to develop in to interesting adventures. It covers the same things it used to, plus a few more details on campaign-type games. As for rules - instead of just saying "here they are," the book tells you how to apply them.

All the "B" and "X" modules can be located on the territory map, and future modules should all fit nicely - a ready-made campaign. Notes on designing your own areas are also included. The guidelines are general but thorough, enough so that existing AD&D game DMs may want to get the set.

All of this material has been crammed into the same amount of space; Zeb's "Isle of Dread" module will still be in the set, and the rules booklet will still be 64 pages. No price increase is expected in the near future. But I wouldn't count on that for long; you'd be wise to get a set soon, before paper and printing costs force an increase. There hasn't been a price change for a good while, but all things must pass.

Now I'm working on the rest of the D&D game system, planning and outlining what is to come in Set #3, Companion, and #4, Masters. The old Gods,

Demigods & Heroes book is due for revision, too. I'm lucky enough to get large chunks of EGG's time, for brainstorming sessions and design approvals, and Francois Froideval is adding his creativity to the projects. He's already done a map of the globe, with all the continents and things, and the area described in Expert is in one small corner of the world, the starting point for epic adventure.

Humans can work their way up to level 36 (15-25 in the Companion Set, 26-36 in Masters). All characters can either travel or settle down to rule their domains, living in and running their own castles. The demi-human Clanmasters have ancient secrets to be shared with their deserving PC kinfolk; magic-users consult with their brother wizards and discover new details of magical power. Paladins, knights, and druids roam the land, but are very different from their AD&D counterparts. And the Overlord reigns supreme - but only until deposed by some lucky, clever, and powerful player character.

At the highest levels of power, the characters may strive for the greatest of goals: immortality. Details and procedures will be provided, and the adventure does not stop even at that high point, for the Immortals have their own adventures and methods of progression.

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vast astral sea; strange and wondrous experiences beckon to the brave.

Every journey begins with the first step, and this journey starts with the Basic Set. The DUNGEONS & DRAGONS game is a way for us to imagine together - like watching the same movie, or reading the same book. But you can write the stories, without putting a word on paper - just by playing the D&D game.

You, along with your friends, will create a great fantasy story. You will put it away after each game, and go back to school or work, but - like a book - the adventure will wait. It's better than a book, though; it will keep going as long as you like.

It's nearly the most popular game ever made. And you'll see why, shortly after you get into it. When you bought some other game or book, did you ever think, "Gee, that's nice, but it's not quite what I thought it would be. . . ." Well, your D&D adventures will be just what you want, because you're the one making them up!

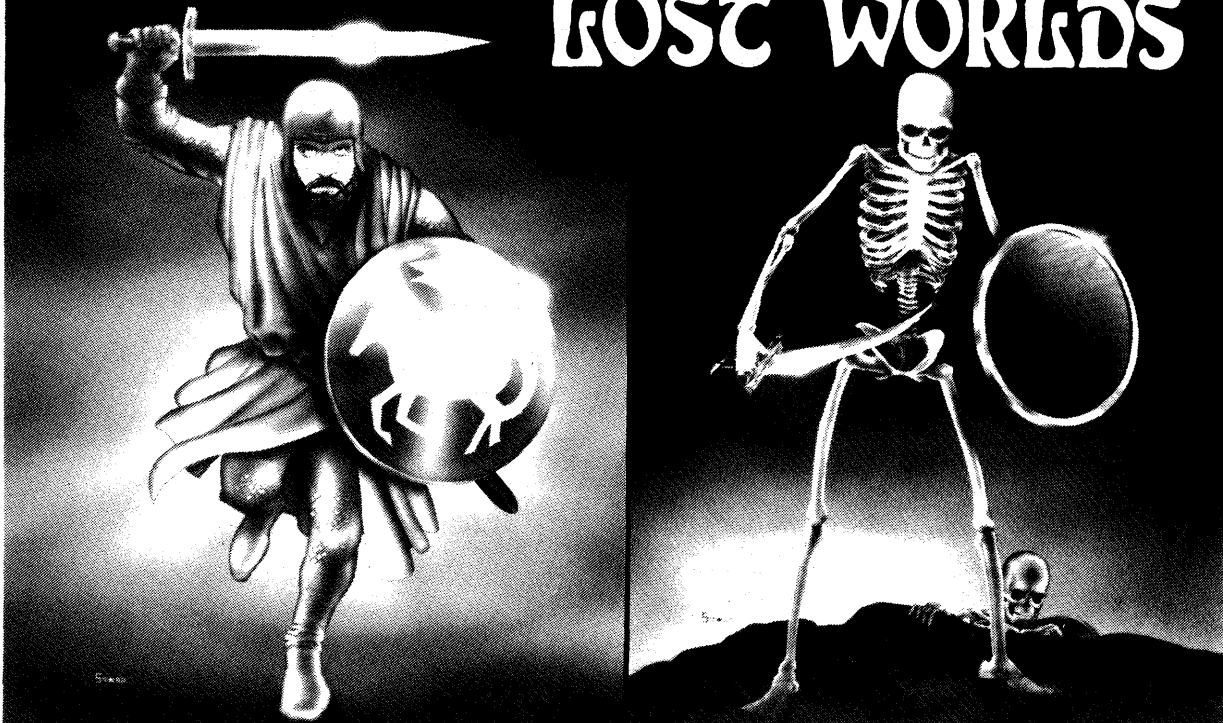
And it's not hard. It takes a little reading and a little thinking, but most of all, it's fun.

It's fun when you and your friends get together, isn't it?

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Ah, yes; it does cost one more thing, which you also have, right now - a bit of time. It takes a few minutes to learn the basic rules, and another hour or two to play a full game. You'll probably want to spend more time, and might even make it a hobby; millions of people have.

But for now, just sit back and let your imagination run: Your character stands atop a grassy hill. The sun glints off your golden hair, rippling in the warm breeze; you absent-mindedly rub the gem-studded hilt of your magic sword, and glance over at the dwarf and the elf, bickering as usual about how to load the horses. The magic-user has memorized her spells, and says she's ready to go. A dangerous dungeon entrance gapes at you from the mountainside nearby, and inside, a fearsome dragon awaits. Now, it's time to get moving....

Have fun!

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