

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS®

WHAT IT IS AND WHERE IT IS GOING

by Gary Gygax

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® pioneered role playing in the gaming hobby. It brought fantasy before hobbyists, and it set before them a game-form most had never heard of. Perhaps 150,000 persons now play *D&D*®, but it was by no means an instant success. 1,000 boxed sets, hand assembled and labeled, took eleven months to sell, another 1,000 of the same took only five or six months to sell (and Tactical Studies Rules was thrilled). Finally a third printing of 2,000 sold in five months. So from January, 1974, to December, 1975, only 4,000 sets of the original version of the game were in circulation. (Of course, I have no way of knowing how many pirated copies of *D&D* were in existence, but some estimates place the figure at about 20% of the total sales, some as high as 50%. In any case 5,000 or 6,000 sets was certainly nothing to set the gaming world on fire, or was it?) Today the "Basic Set" sells 4,000 copies per month, and the sales graph is upwards.

A month has not gone by in the last two years when I haven't been interviewed by one or more newspaper writers or independent journalists who want to know all about *D&D*. I have likewise been interviewed by radio and TV news media, generally for the same reason. At the risk of claiming too much for the game, I have lately taken to likening the whole to Aristotle's *POETICS*, carrying the analogy to even more ridiculous heights by stating that each Dungeon Master uses the rules to become a playwright (hopefully of Shakespearean stature), scripting only plot outlines however, and the players become the Thespians. Before incredulity slackens so as to allow the interviewer to become hostile, I hasten to add that the analogy applies only to the basic parts of the whole pastime, not to the actual merits of *D&D*, its DMs, or players. If you consider the game, the analogy is actually quite apt. *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS* is like none other in that it requires the game master to create part or all of a fantasy world. Players must then become *personae* in this place and interact with the other populace. This is, of course a tall order for all concerned — rules, DM, and players alike.

Relating a basic adventure, an episodic game session in the campaign, to a trip in an underground labyrinth does help the uninitiated to understand the simplest *D&D* fundamentals — discover an unknown area, move around in it by means of descriptive narration from the Dungeon Master, overcome whatever obstacles are there (traps, problems, monsters), and return with whatever has been gained during the course of the whole. The DM takes the part of everything in this fantasy world which is not operated by a player. While this should not mean it is then a game of DM versus the players, it does mean that *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS* is a co-operative game where players must interact successfully amongst themselves first, and non-hostile portions of the campaign milieu thereafter, in order to be successful. The Dungeon Master is incidentally against the players when he or she is operating that part of the "world" which is hostile, or potentially so, but in general the referee must be disinterested.

At about this point I am always asked: "Well, then, how do you win? who wins?!" The answer is, EVERYBODY — providing that the game is well run. The DM gets the satisfaction of testing his abilities against those of the players, the fun of taking the non-player parts, and the accolades of participants when a particularly well-done adventure or series has been completed. Players enjoy the challenges of each situation and have the prospect of continuing adventures and puzzles to confront them, each with his or her game *persona*. Thus all taking part in the campaign get something besides a momentary diversion. Winning no more applies to *D&D* than it does to real life. The successful DMs and players gain renown via their campaigns or their

superior characters. To enthusiasts of the game it is far more satisfying than triumphing in a single game or whole series of games.

Simply stated, *D&D* is a multi-player game of fantasy role playing, where the rules give systems of resolution for common game occurrences, lists and explanations of things which are not actual (monsters, spells, magic items, etc.), systems for interaction, and suggestions as to how to put this into the campaign, i.e. create the milieu. Once begun, the campaign continues until the DM and/or all of the players decide it should end. As with any exercise in fantasy it requires suspension of disbelief. Those who find the game interesting will soon enough thereafter create their own sort of involvement and belief. But why is such a game (and similar fantasy role playing games, for that matter) so popular? What is its appeal?

Our modern world has few, if any, frontiers. We can no longer escape to the frontier of the West, explore Darkest Africa, sail to the South Seas. Even Alaska and the Amazon Jungles will soon be lost as wild frontier areas. Furthermore, adventures are not generally possible anymore. The frontiers are receding into memories, modern communications make all of the world available to casual travellers, and the most backward places are becoming more and more civilized. Certainly it is still possible to go scuba diving, mountain climbing, auto racing, sky diving, and so on. These are expensive and risky for no real purpose in most cases. One can also have adventures as a criminal, or possibly as an agent of the government (if one is sufficiently qualified), but the former is distasteful to say the least, and the latter is most unlikely. Americans, with more leisure today than ever, crave entertainment. Some desire adventure and excitement. Obviously, various entertainment media are doing big business — TV, motion pictures, spectator sports, recreational vehicles, sporting goods, book publishers, and game manufacturers are all growing. "Escape fiction" sells better today than ever, and witness the success of the recent science fiction and fantasy films.

Looking towards space and the future for new frontiers and adventure is logical. The universe has fascinated mankind since recorded history, and today it seems quite probable that within a few decades numbers of us will live off of the earth, and in a century or so we will travel to the stars. Perhaps there will be frontiers and adventure enough then for all who care to test their mettle. But it is no less surprising for us to look into the realms of fantasy for imagined adventure. Most literate people grow up on a diet of fairy tales, Walt Disney, and comic book superheroes. We somehow relate to stories of young princes going out into the world to seek their fortune, of knights rescuing maidens in distress and slaying dragons, of dealings with wicked magicians and evil witches. The myth of all peoples contain great stocks of such fantasy lore. If nothing else, the desire to believe in such seems to be innate in humanity. Whether or not there are parallel worlds or places where fantastic creatures actually live and magic works is not germane, for most of us are familiar with the concepts as if they were actual, and we have a desire to become involved, if only vicariously, amongst such heroic epics of magic and monsters. It is therefore scarcely surprising that a game which directly involves participants in a make-believe world of just such nature should prove popular; and had I reasoned out the enthusiasm it roused amongst the first few who played it, it would have been evident that *D&D* was destined to become a very popular game indeed. (Naturally, hindsight is usually a 20/20 proposition, and the fact is I wrote the game for a small audience of devoted miniatures players . . .)

If millions take to the fantasy world of J.R.R. Tolkien, and nearly as many follow the heroic feats of Conan, the market potential of a

game system which provides participants with a pastime which creates play resembling these adventuresome worlds and their inhabitants is bounded only by its accessibility. Access has two prominent aspects; availability is the first; that is, are potential players informed of the fact that the game exists, and are they able to physically obtain it; and difficulty is the second, for if once obtained the game is so abstruse as to be able to be played only by persons with intelligence far above the norm, or if the game demands a volume of preliminary work which is prohibitive for the normal individual, this will be recognized and the offering shunned even if it is available. *D&D* failed on both counts, and still its following grew. Today we are putting *D&D* onto the track where it is envisioned it will have both maximum availability and minimum difficulty. This is best illustrated in the "Basic Set."

Well over two years ago we recognized that there was a need for an introductory form of the game. In 1977 the colorfully boxed "Basic Set" was published. It contained simplified, more clearly written rules, dungeon geomorphs, selections of monsters and treasures to place in these dungeons, and a set of polyhedra dice — in short all that a group of beginning players need to start play with relative ease. Later editions have cleaned up most of the flaws in the first, and the newest will do away with the geomorphs and list of monsters and treasures in favor of a complete basic module, so that difficulty will be reduced even further. This should broaden the game's appeal to a base in the millions, and then the major factor becomes availability. Popular demand always increases availability, and *D&D* has been blessed by its enthusiasts most generously in this regard. Coupled with the work being done by TSR to publicize and promote the game, the availability factor will also be maximized over the next few years. Finally, to maintain interest, a series of new and interesting modular dungeon and outdoor scenarios, as well as more playing aids, will be made available periodically. The number of *D&D* players should certainly continue to mushroom for several years.

Fanatical game hobbyists often express the opinion that *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS* will continue as an ever-expanding, always improving game system. TSR and I see it a bit differently. Currently *D&D* is moving in two directions. There is the "Original" game system and the new *ADVANCED D&D®* system. New participants can move from the "Basic Set" into either form without undue difficulty — especially as playing aid offerings become more numerous, and that is in process now. Americans have somehow come to equate change with improvement. Somehow the school of continuing evolution has conceived that *D&D* can go on in a state of flux, each new version "new and improved!" From a standpoint of sales, I beam broadly at the very thought of an unending string of new, improved, super, energized, versions of *D&D* being hyped to the loyal followers of the gaming hobby in general and role playing fantasy games in particular. As a game designer I do not agree, particularly as a gamer who began with chess. The original could benefit from a careful reorganization and expansion to clarify things, and this might be done at some future time. As all of the *ADVANCED D&D* system is not written yet, it is a bit early for prognostication, but I envision only minor expansions and some rules amending on a gradual, edition to edition, basis. When you have a fine product, it is time to let well enough alone. I do not believe that hobbyists and casual players should be continually barraged with new rules, new systems, and new drains on their purses. Certainly there will be changes, for the game is not perfect; but I do not believe the game is so imperfect as to require constant improvement.

Does this mean that *D&D* will be at a dead end when the last of *AD&D®* is published? Hardly! Modules and similar material will continue to be released so as to make the DM's task easier and his or her campaign better. Quite frankly, the appeal of *D&D* rests principally upon the broad shoulders of the hard-working Dungeon Masters. The rules never need improvement if the DM is doing a proper job, but of course he or she can do so only if the rules are sufficient to allow this. With refined rules and modular additions, all aspects of a long lived and exciting campaign will unquestionably be there for the DM to employ. Will *D&D* dead end when its novelty dies? That is impossible to answer. It is my personal opinion that the game form is a classic which is of the same stamp as chess and *MONOPOLY®*; time will be the judge. No doubt that there is a limit to the appeal of the game in any of its current forms. If tens of millions play a relatively simple, so-

cial sort of a game such as *MONOPOLY*, it is a sure thing that a far more difficult game such as *D&D* will have a much more limited audience. As the game cannot be simplified beyond a certain point, we look to another means of popularizing it.

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS can be played on a computer. Computers are most certainly a big aspect of the near future, particularly the home computer. Non-programmable computer games are already making big inroads into the toy and hobby market. They will grow still more, and soon programmable games will join this trend. *D&D* program cassettes plugged into a home computer would obviate the need for a DM or other players. Thus the labor of setting up a campaign or the necessity of having a fairly large group to play in it would be removed. The graphic display would be exciting, and the computer would slave away doing all of the record work and mechanics necessary to the game, giving nearly instantaneous results to the player or players. Computerization of *D&D* has many other benefits also, and such games would not destroy the human-run campaign but supplement game participation. This is the direction we hope to make available to *D&D*. Let's see if my foresight is as keen as my hindsight.

All that being so, what is the purpose of this column, the reader may justifiably inquire? Well, as I make no claim to perfection, no such claim can be made for *ADVANCED D&D* or *D&D* for that matter. This column will cover controversial rules or systems, problem and so-called problem areas of *D&D/AD&D*, and consider new material as well. If the games are not to be continually changing and "evolving," neither is it envisioned that they have reached such a state of perfection so as to become immutable. What appears herein is discussion which will sometimes lead to alteration, amendment, or expansion of one or the other system. Initially, what you read here will be direct from me, but all DMs — and players also — are invited to submit article material of high calibre. A glance at the introductory sections of all of the works comprising the *D&D/AD&D* systems will show that many individuals contributed to the designs. The list in the forthcoming *DUNGEON MASTERS GUIDE* is longer still. All of these individuals, and the audience at large, are cordially invited to submit their thoughts and opinions on pertinent matters. If I am not to be "the great god gygax," a claim I have never made nor supported, there must be input which presents argumentation and systems which are meaningful alternatives to *replace* or *augment* existing rules and systems. This is not to say that anyone's favorite variant, even if well-designed, is likely to become *D&D/AD&D*, but at worst reasons for why it is unacceptable will be given, and the possible results could be a major change in the game.

So here is your forum. Let us hope it becomes a useful and meaningful exchange!



...SO THEN I LAUGHS, AN' SEZ TO HIM "GEE, HALF THE PARTY WIPED OUT, AN' THE ONLY LOOT A SINGLE +1 ARROW. THAT'S PRETTY FUNNY! WHATCHA GONNA DO WITH IT?"