

Dungeons and Dragons

It's more than strategy game to 300,000 addicts who play it

By Bill Dampier Toronto Star

"What you see," says the Dungeon Master, "is a sort of a mix between a spider and a scorpion. They're large, about as large as a man, and they're moving toward you about as fast as a human would move. What are you going to do?"

"How many are there?" asks Mirria the Elf, magic user and fighting man.

"Three," says the Dungeon Master.

"Damn bugs," says the Elf.

Down the stairs, it's Saturday night on Yonge St. The Disco Queens of both sexes are strutting their stuff and the curb cruisers are wasting precious fossil fuels in the slow raucous climb from Queen to Bloor and back.

But here, up the three flights of stairs at the back of Mr. Gameway's Ark, the world is magic. Magic!

The magic, of course, is all in the mind. This is a game, only a game. But it's a game that has attracted so many adherents it is assuming something of the proportions of an underground religion in Toronto and all across North America, a game that attracts everyone from high-school drop-outs to cabinet ministers. And finally, it's a game that has made a millionaire of a man who used to repair shoes in his basement to make ends meet.

Impossible, you say? Straight out of the fantasy comics? Right on. But here, with the full-scale mockup of the bridge of the Starship Enterprise in one corner, it all seems, well, real.

The game is called Dungeons and Dragons — Dung and Drag in some quarters, or more frequently, D&D — and for the growing numbers who describe themselves, with more than a touch of pride, as "hard-core gamers," it is something more than a game. A cult, perhaps. Or an addiction. For some obsessive players, it's a way of life. For all of them, an improvement on mundane, common-place, everyday reality.

Loose basis

The rules, as one player says, "are only slightly less complex than life." The game is loosely based on Tolkien's Lord Of The Rings, with added elements from virtually every horror movie and fantasy novel ever produced. In essence it is a personalized adventure through the medieval world of warriors and wizards.

The Dungeon Master is both the omnipotent referee and the cunning architect of each session. He designs a convoluted, labyrinthine "dungeon" on a sheet of graph paper, fills it with treasure, and populates it with "monsters" drawn either from his own vivid imagination or from the Monster Level Guide, (All The World's Monsters) a sort of standard encyclopedia of things that go bump in the night.

The Dungeon Master functions as a sort of cross between God and the devil, analyzing each player's character and abilities, and responsible for providing each with a satisfying adventure.

"He can't make it too easy, and he can't make it too tough," says Steve Krakowski, a 32-year-old marketing manager who claims he is over — almost — his obsession with D&D. "If he's too easy, we call him a 'Monty Hall' — you know, the game show host: 'Behind this door, we have 5,000 gold pieces. And behind this door, we have 6,000.' But if he makes it too tough, everyone gets killed off on the first level, and that isn't much fun."

The players, any number of players, each roll dice to determine the characteristics they will assume during the game, drawn from a list of attributes — strength, intelligence, wisdom, constitution, dexterity and charisma — that define who they'll be in the quest for the treasure that lies hidden in the dungeon.

Within the limitations imposed by your character, and with the permission of the Dungeon Master, you can then become anything you wish: D&D characters have included such oddities as a schizophrenic troll, a samurai Rabbi, a penguin that worked magic, and a "slightly gay" cleric known as Oberon, King Of The Faeries.

And then it's into the dungeon, on the quest for the Dungeon Master's treasure, and at the risk of the Dungeon Master's monsters, to gain, through magic or cunning or force of arms, fame and wealth and true love. Or all of the above.

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The Machiavellian mind that devised this tortuous exercise in fantasy belongs to a 41-year-old man named Gary Gygax, who used to be an insurance underwriter specializing in — naturally enough — "unusual risks."

Gygax commuted two hours a day by train to his job in a Chicago insurance office, and used the time to play games, a pastime that eventually led to a part-time job as an editor and "play-tester" for a games manufacturer.

"I wanted to continue that as a career," he says, "so I quit my job" — this with a wife and five children to support — "and started designing games, mainly war games. I taught myself to repair shoes, and I ran a little shoe repair business in my home; that helped to support us."

War game

At the same time he was involved with Dave Arneson, the co-author of Dungeons and Dragons, in a group that was playing a war game based on Tolkien's Lord Of The Rings trilogy. Eventually the war game became Dungeons and Dragons.

At first it looked like a flop. The game was put on the market in 1974, and it took 11 months to sell the first 1,000 sets. Hard-core gamers are a conservative lot.

Since then, however, sales have increased every year, and the thing is blossoming nicely. Last month, for example, Tactical Study Rules, the Lake Geneva, Wis., company that markets Dungeons and Dragons, sold 6,500 pieces of the basic set. That's last month. At \$12.95 each. And the basic set is like a Barbie doll without any clothes; you have to have the accessories.

While D&D can be played with nothing more than pen, paper, and imagination, most players want the assorted paraphernalia that goes with it: Polyhedral dice, miniature figures modeled in lead of their favorite monsters, standardized dungeons, encyclopedias of monsters, the monthly Dragon magazine, rules for advanced D&D (using characters with "psionic abilities") and handy reference books to make the game faster.

By one estimate there are about 300,000 D&D players in North America, about 10,000 of them in Toronto, and each one has spent about \$40 on his hobby.

Gygax intends to keep the D&D wheel spinning for some time. He's toying with the idea of a computerized version that could be programmed for home computers, and a simplified version is also in the works.

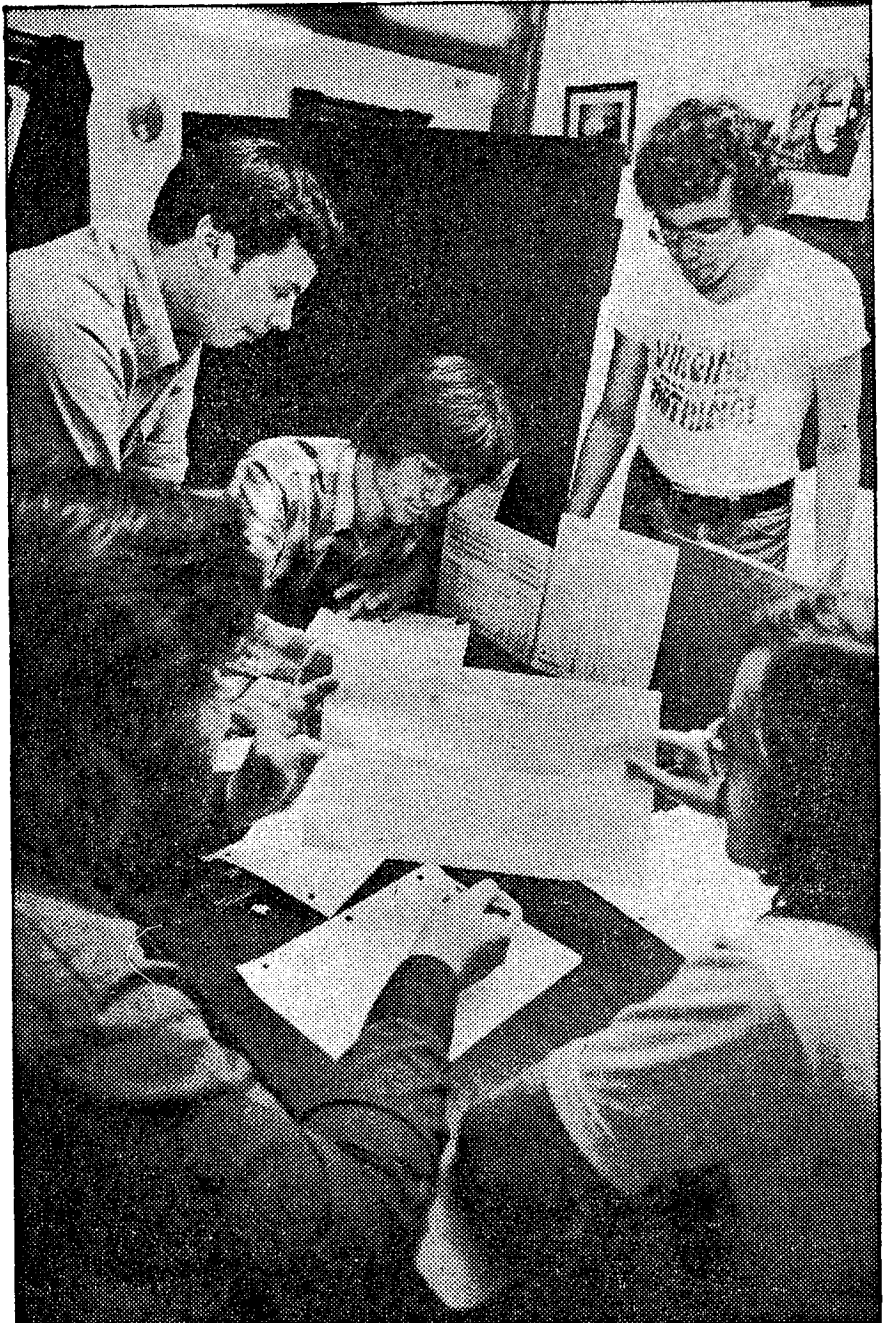
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Back in Mr. Gameway's Ark, the Dungeon Master, aka Rob Graham, a 23-year-old computer programmer, is putting away his dungeon. He used to be a D&D addict, he says, but now he's cutting down. He only plays on Saturday night now. Every Saturday night, of course. During the week he works on his new dungeon. It will take two years to complete, but it will be much bigger, and much, much better, and it will be filled with very interesting creatures.

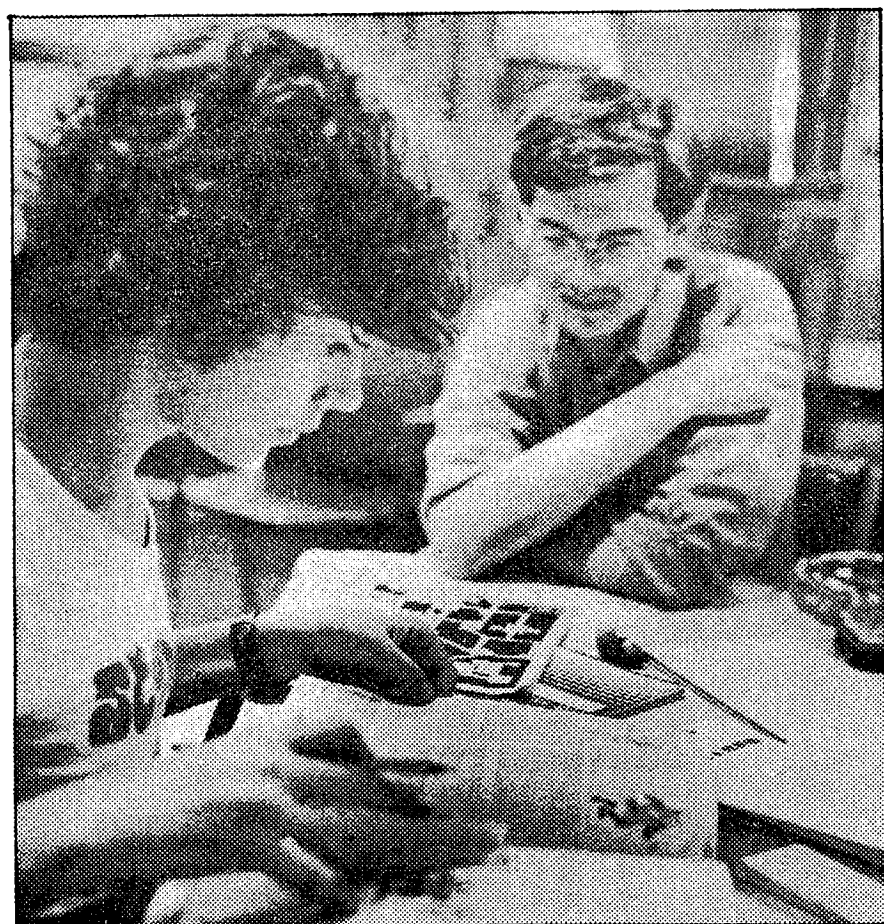
So the gamers say good night, and stumble yawning down the stairs and out on the street where the Disco Queens and cruisers, the tourists and the sight-seers and the heavy traffic in leather and chains let them slip past unnoticed.

Because nothing shows, you see. There are thousands of them out there, wandering through the warm summer nights, and on the outside they look just like ordinary, normal, everyday citizens. Just like you and I.

But inside their heads, ah, on the inside they're Mirria the Elf and Torku the Evil, rescuing maidens and conquering dragons, casting their spells and stealing the treasure, and improving at every step.



Hard core D and D fans hard at it in Mr. Gameway's Ark



Terry Fedoriuk (left) and Steve Krakowski in a duel