

# Dungeons and Dragons

## An underground game is ready to surface

BY LIAM LACEY

**“W**E'D LIKE TO go down into your dungeon,” says the warrior. Up in the games club of Mr. Gameway's Ark the boys are playing Dungeons and Dragons, a fantasy game where subterranean travellers battle mythical monsters for treasures and magic powers.

There are three at the table: the warrior, a Buddhist monk and the Dungeon Master. The Dungeon Master is about 17, thin and long-limbed with coffee-colored skin. On the chair beside him rests his stove-pipe hat, the kind magicians wear. The Dungeon Master tilts back in his chair until his ribs show through his white T-shirt, his eyes narrow and his lip curls into a sneer: “It'll cost you. Ten gold pieces each.” (It is the Dungeon Master's privilege to be theatrical.) The warrior and the monk agree to pay and the Dungeon Master begins, “The door opens. Before you is a stairway descending into darkness . . .”

The Dungeon Master's real name is Scott. Most weekends he can be seen, with his conspicuous hat, either playing with friends at Mr. Gameways or across Yonge Street at Tolkien's World comparing prices on the latest Dungeons and Dragons literature. The game inspires the sort of fanatic devotion usually associated with mind-bending religious cults. When one of Scott's friends, a college professor's son, was forbidden to play the game because it was interfering with his school work, he ran away from home. TSR Hobbies (Tactics Studies Rules), the Wisconsin-based company that makes the game, estimates that there are no more than 150,000 serious players in the world. Many of these play in small groups, like guerrilla cells, making their own rules and engaging in lengthy continuous matches. As Shelley Swallow, a Mr. Gameways buyer says, “Dungeons and Dragons is still very underground. It's even underground among games people.” Yet its growth rate is astonishing.

In 1974, when TSR began production, they trickled out 1,000 sets in 11 months. Now, each month they produce 4,000 sets of the basic game alone, plus nearly 10,000 supplementary booklets for a yearly gross of over \$1-million. At Mr. Gameways, about 25 are sold each week — twice as many as a steady favorite, Scrabble. There is no doubt that TSR, which produces 10 different games all more or less like Dungeons and Dragons, dominates the fantasy games market. The company's man-in-charge of long-range planning, Brian Blume, says the game is too complicated to become a popular family favorite — he's aiming at the college crowd. Mr. Gameways' Shelley Swallow agrees that the game is for special people only: “We don't sell the game to anyone. We show them how it works and in many cases we recommend something else. Most adults aren't willing to try something that new and demanding.”

Understandably, Dungeons and Dragons is a monstrosity compared to the geometric elegance of backgammon or chess. No board is used. There is seldom a clear-cut winner. The only equipment required is a pencil, paper and several oddly shaped dice. The set, which retails for just over \$12, has one essential item — a 46-page rule book that, at least on first reading, is only marginally less complicated than a Ptolemaic analysis of planetary motion.

The Dungeon Master comes to the game with a prepared map of an underground labyrinth drawn to scale on graph paper. He selects monsters from a list in the manual — perhaps some orcs, a purple worm, a minotaur and a gelatinous cube. (Tolkien, horror comics, and classical mythology all contribute to the cast.) These monsters have various talents, also listed in the book, and they must be strategically placed in

caves and grottos where they sit on their treasures and wait for unsuspecting travellers.

Each player selects a character to travel through this maze — a thief, an elf or a cleric, who, like the monsters, are listed in the booklet. Particular virtues and vices are determined by rolls of the dice, so the character walks into the dungeon armed with equipment for the journey and a lot of numbers — nine points for strength, three for intelligence and so on. The travellers converse with the Dungeon Master as they move through his dungeon; he gives them hints every step of the way. They ask for information and at every encounter the rule book is checked to see which die to roll and how to interpret the results.

The fun part of the game comes when players move on to the supplementary texts and begin inventing their own monsters, weapons and characters.

Dungeon Masters develop a style, groups explore particular variations of battles and types of traps. Moving from one group to another is a little like learning a new dialect of a language.

The inventor of Dungeons and Dragons, Gary Gygax, the J. R. R. Tolkien of the games world, sounds disappointingly normal on the telephone from Wisconsin — more middle America than Middle Earth. Gygax, now 40, grew up on fantasy literature — comic books, fairy tales and sword and sorcery novels. He made up several games involving medieval battles before he hit upon Dungeons and Dragons.

(The magic ingredient, the labyrinth, was borrowed from another designer, Dave Arneson.) For more than a year Gygax tried to sell his game to various large companies while mimeographed copies of the rules circulated among college students across the country creating an underground following.

Finally, Gygax borrowed money from friends to produce the game himself. “Originally it was more in self-defence than anything,” he says. “I got tired of people coming to my home and waking me up with late night phone calls asking about Dungeons and Dragons.” Gygax plans to create a simplified version of the game for a wider audience. “The calibre will go down,” he admits. “The creative people kicked it up first and now it's time for others to have a chance.”

Science fiction writer, Andree Norton, has written a novel called Quaig's Keel, based on the game and Robert Heinlein, author of Stranger in a Strange Land is an avid fan. This January TSR will hold its first Dungeons and Dragons Masters' Tournament at Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. Dungeons and Dragons, the underground cult game, is finally surfacing — a long way from snakes and ladders.



MALETT 77