

BY J. ERIC HOLMES

"You've come to a trap door in the floor," says the game referee, "with an iron ring set in the center."

"Let's open it," says a player. "You dwarves are too impulsive," says another. "Let the thief listen first."

"Wait 'til I put the mage down," protests someone else. "I've been carrying him for three turns now and I may need to fight."

"Well, there's nothing else to do, since he's paralyzed."

"The thief doesn't hear anything, he's going to cautiously raise the trap door with the end of his ten foot pole."

The referee consults a table in his rule book, rolls a die and declares, "The trap door opens, there's a giant rat clinging to the underside of the door. He's not surprised, so he makes the first attack . . ."

"Jim," cries a voice, "have your thief fall to the floor and I'll fire over him with the magic crossbow!"

The players of this game are sitting around a table, probably littered with rule books, paper, dice and refreshments while the referee consults a map hidden behind a folding cardboard screen. In a role-playing game like this, each player takes the part of one of the adventurers, the referee plots out the scene of the adventure, and they tell the story as a joint enterprise.

Since most referees invent their own scenarios for the players, no two games are identical. Because each adventure must be plotted in detail before the game, the referee spends many hours over his notes and maps. The rules of the science-fiction game *Traveler*™ contain the instruction: "The referee has the responsibility for mapping the universe before actual play begins!" For players and referees alike there are game supplements, magazines (at least nine professional and as many amateur magazines are devoted to role playing), miniature metal figures, and other paraphernalia. Parents and friends are apt to become alarmed when someone starts spending hundreds of hours on a game of make-believe, and they are easily convinced that the games are "bad for your mind."

This grim suspicion gained more credulity with the disappearance of a

Michigan State student in 1979. James was a *Dungeons & Dragons*™ addict and there were some odd maps in his dorm room. A rumor started that "live D&D games" were played in steam tunnels under the university. The steam tunnels were searched without result. There was a lot of news media attention because a "Jonestown Cult" aspect was read into the case. James turned up, alive and well, sometime later, but most people don't remember that part. If I tell a group of strangers that I play *Dungeons & Dragons*, someone always asks, "Wasn't there a student who got killed playing the game a few years ago?" No, there wasn't.

Confusion over the disappearance of the student from MSU has been compounded by the publication of Rona Jaffe's novel, *Mazes and Monsters* (Delacorte Press, 1981), which is based on this incident. In Jaffe's novel, one of the four students at a fictional college disappears under bizarre circumstances, and the four have been playing "Mazes and Monsters" in some nearby caves, not steam tunnels. Jaffe makes the point that the players bring their psychological problems to the game, not the reverse. All of the characters are quite disturbed, but all are likeable, and the reader becomes increasingly anxious about them, knowing from the

first page that one of them is going to flip out and "go into the game." The psychiatry is unrealistic, but the writing is very good.

D&D, and the dozen or so other role playing games currently fashionable, involve a group of gamers in an imaginary world of adventure. Because everybody in the game agrees to treat it as if it were real, the imaginary world achieves a kind of "social reality" that is a major part of the fun. This would not be a wholesome pastime for someone with schizophrenia. Such patients are already suffering from a difficulty distinguishing inner fantasy from reality. For the rest of us neurotics, however, the game poses no serious threat. Let's face it, most D&D players are shy, introverted, non-athletic and imaginative. For us, a game in which we get to be strong as an ox, superintelligent, or fast as greased lightning is a great emotional outlet. For us, a game that welds a group of friends into an ongoing joint project, a game that requires participation, assertiveness, and, at the same time, cooperation, is certainly a healthy thing.

The computer versions of the games lack this social aspect, since they pit a

single player against a computer program that provides a maze and a series of puzzles. Even the new Mattel D&D computer toy is this sort of maze and puzzle game. They are fun, particularly if the programmer/designer is inventive, but they lack the imagination and interaction of a real role playing game.

During the past year, in Utah and California, D&D clubs or after-school programs have been opposed on religious grounds, accused of practicing demonology. This is an extreme view. True, there are demons in the game, just as there are dragons and unicorns and other imaginary creatures. Of course, if you believe in the reality of demons, then they make perfectly good monsters for a game, and no one takes them seriously. It is unfortunate that this misunderstanding developed over *Dungeons & Dragons*, because D&D is a very pro-Christian game. There are clerics in the game and they are obviously Christian clerics, healers and fighters, rather like the Knights Templar of the Crusades. While demons are allowed, Gary Gygax, the in-

ventor of D&D, has refused to permit angels. The gods and avatars of other religions may appear, but no angels.

I don't think role playing games are dangerous to either your soul or your mind. With millions of games sold, one is sure to meet some genuine crazies who play D&D. Playing the game, however, will encourage socialization, reading (mythology, fiction, military history) and tolerance. And, if it doesn't accomplish all that, at least it's a lot of fun.

*Holmes is the author of Fantasy Role Playing Games, published last year by Hippocrene Books. He edited the first edition of the D&D "Basic Set" for TSR Hobbies. In real life he is Professor of Neurology at the USC School of Medicine.*

## Dangerous to Your Health?



DAN EICHOLTZ

# DUNGEONS & DRAGONS



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