'Secrets of Blackmoor' uncovers the true wizardry of Dungeons & Dragons
Documentary filmmakers seek to raise $25,000 on Kickstarter to finish post-production

By Peter Jones

The journey to discover the secret truth of Dungeons & Dragons is ripe with all the conflict and character of the archetypal fantasy role-playing game itself.

"There are two factions—the Gargaxians and the Arnesonians," explained longtime player M. Griffith. "But what if there's something you don't know about the deeper truth?"

A magical universe where anything can happen always made sense to gamer Chris Graves—but the world of D&D had also been like a mysterious old book of wisdom gathering dust on the shelf.

"As a child, I thought D&D had always existed, but it didn't," Graves said. "There wasn't D&D—and then there was. The fascinating thing is where did it come from?"

Those mysteries are at the core of *Secrets of Blackmoor—The True History of Dungeons and Dragons*, an in-progress documentary being produced in Colorado. A Kickstarter campaign to raise $25,000 to support post-production will run through Christmas Eve.

"It's also a way to get the word out about the movie," Graves said.

Various levels of support include such benefits as online access to the working draft of *Blackmoor*, a special-issue DVD of the final product, t-shirts, books, bags and more. Higher levels of support include a first-edition board game delivered by a co-creator and tickets to the premiere.

In the documentary—named for a legendary D&D prototype—filmmakers Griffith and Graves open new doors to the D&D legend, leading a journey through the game's mysterious—and eventually controversial—origins in the 1960s war-game community of Minnesota's twin cities.

Although game designer Gary Gygax is often credited as D&D's architect, a vocal minority is quick to defend the unsung Dave Arneson as the game's equally inventive, but less market-savvy, co-creator. While Gygax was busy as a pop-culture figure [tying with J.R.R. Tolkien on *GameSpy's* "30 Most Influential People in Gaming"], Arneson was defending his contributions in court.

Like most creative bursts, D&D was never a self-conscious revelation.

"Arneson wasn't the type of person to talk about himself—it's kind of that Minnesota 'nice' thing," Graves said. "Most of the people we talked with in the documentary are very humble, good-hearted people. That's just not their style. I think that's why their story is untold."

Secrets of Blackmoor separates fact from fiction—and fantasy—in a decidedly nuanced story about a group of friends. They were passionate about their quest for a new kind of "play," one that would take place in the boundless theater of the mind, while never leaving the basement.

Some in the group went on to develop medical devices or launch video-game companies. One became an engineer at NASA. But even with smart people in the room, without the forward-thinking Gygax, D&D would never have evolved into the commercially viable behemoth it became.

"He was the person who was in the right place at the right time. He was able to look at this and say this is incredible. But it would not have happened without Arneson, either," Graves said.

The movie reveals D&D as a perfect marriage of the tactical games of old and a brave new world of fantasy role playing. The genesis took hold when avid gamer Dan Nicholson happened to check out an 1880s-era manual called *Strategos* from the University of Minnesota library.

The U.S. military war-game guide would offer hints of "open play" and the kind of referee-run "reality" that became hallmarks of D&D. The fateful group of gamers was born when Nicholson tried to find the few others who had taken home this esoteric volume of gaming's pre-history.

"This is before the internet. It's before all these ways of connecting," Griffith said. "So Nicholson goes to the library and said, 'Can I see the checkout card?' They start to put things together and create their own game. It was ingenious."

The final treasure was a new kind of "play," unlike any other.

"It's no longer a zero-sum game where there's a victor and a loser," Graves said. "There are multiple ways of winning. You have six different objectives and each one could be a winner. It's like we're all in this together."

To even call D&D a "game" might almost be a misnomer.

"It was revolutionary because it took the idea of make-believe and melded it with storytelling and created an open-ended adventure," Griffith said.

D&D would change the lives of many in ways that few market-based games have done.

"It saved my sanity as a teenager," Graves said. "You could get together with friends and do this thing that didn't cost too much money and be myself with people who were just like me. I don't know what I would have done without it."

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